

A True Slytherin

Chapter 1 – The Potters:

"Shut up!"

"Don't 'shut up' me! You better apologize to your mother, or else –"

"Or else what?"

"Or else I'm going to –"

"What? Lock me in my room? Let me save you the trouble, I'm going to do it myself! I'm out of here!"

"Don't you walk out on me, young man!"

"Bite me!"

"You better start showing us a grateful attitude!"

"Or else?"

"Or else I'm going to kick your arse with a hex!"

"Don't you mean 'an axe'? It would be more like your evil side!"

"You're right! Your way is a lot better than mine! Now, go upstairs and think about what you've just said! And I don't want to see you until morning unless you come with a big, red 'SORRY' written on your forehead!"

"Then I guess we won't be meeting for a while!"

"Fine!"

The door to the room above the kitchen slammed and silence fell through the house after 15 minutes of yelling and shouting. Now the only thing James Potter could hear was his wife sobbing in the kitchen. He walked back down to the kitchen and sat next to her. He

put a hand on her back to comfort her, but Lily kept crying into her hands and rocking back and forth in her chair.

"Don't," he told her. "That prat isn't worth it –"

"That prat is our son, James." Lily looked at him with tearful eyes.

"Or at least what has become of him." He looked at the table. "I don't know what to do anymore! We've tried everything!"

Flashback:

"Mum, Dad? What are you doing here?" young Harry asked as he entered the Headmaster's office and saw his parents sitting there with worried looks on the faces. His friend followed him in. "Professor McGonagall told me Dumbledore wanted to see me..."

"Sit down Harry," James ordered his son. "You can leave. This is a private conversation," he told Harry's friend, who quietly turned on his heel and closed the door behind him.

"What's going on?" Harry asked suspiciously as he took his seat.

"We want you to have a second sorting," Lily told her son.

"What? Why? I'm –"

End of Flashback.

Knock, knock, knock. James came back to reality as he heard a knock on the kitchen door. Both he and Lily looked up and saw Sirius was standing in the doorway, waiting for their approval to come inside.

Lily shot her look at James, he knew what she was thinking about. He nodded and invited his friend to sit with them.

"Trouble in paradise?" Sirius asked, trying to cheer the coldness in the room. James and Lily looked even more depressed than before.

"Gee, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, guys –"

"It's not you, Sirius," James said. "It's Harry again."

"Oh," Sirius said. He sounded like he didn't want to drag into another 'Harry Conversation'. They had those quite often lately, since Harry came back for the summer. "Well, I don't wanna add troubles with the ones you already have with your kid... So, I'll just go, and see you tomorrow... yeah." Sirius got up and tried to make a quick exit through the door, but didn't get the chance to leave before James shut it with his wand, locking Sirius in so he couldn't escape.

"Sirius, I need a favor..." James said quietly.

Sirius turned around to face his friends. He had a fearful expression on his face. He didn't say anything for a moment because he knew James wanted him to respond and Sirius knew exactly what the favor he wanted to ask him was. He finally cracked; the silence was just too tensed. "Oh, no! NO!" he shook his head forcibly.

"Sirius, please..." James pleaded. Lily looked at him hopefully, her great emerald eyes wet from tears.

"No! – James, come on! You want me to...? – no, I can't get in there...! – Please don't make me Prongs, for the sake of our friendship, if you want it to last, please don't make me do this...!" Sirius was now down on his knees begging James with couple of real tears in his eyes.

"You are our only shot, Sirius," Lily said with a sob. "Please. Try and talk to him, maybe he will listen to you."

"But – why me?" Sirius whined. "Why not Moony? He knows him better, he teaches him, and he knows what he's like..."

"It's a full moon, Padfoot," James reminded him.

Sirius muttered a simple "Oh."

James went on, "and besides, you're his Godfather, not Moony."

"Yeah, but that is suppose to take place after you die..." Sirius muttered.

"We've tried everything, Sirius. Everything. Even the best psychologists and healers couldn't help him," Lily said.

"Of course, you took him to a Muggle shrink, what you'd expect?" Sirius took James' glasses off his face and put the tip of the ear piece in his mouth. 'Oh, so let me get this right? You're saying you're a...Wizard... and that your parents want you to suffer and be a good...Gryffindor – is that what you called that thing...? – Umm, yeah, I see, I see... Well, I can write you a prescription for some drugs, they should help and while the effect is taking place, I'll just give you this beautiful white robe... you should get along absolutely fine with it... Just let someone else feed you..." Sirius imitated in an old, wise man voice. James snatched back his glasses from Sirius, who was still on the floor, cleaned the tip of Sirius' spit, and put them back on, looking very angry.

"Will you stop messing around and get serious!"

"I am Sirius!"

"Oh, forget it, James. Clearly, he's not mature enough to handle a 16-year-old boy," Lily sounded irritated. "So when you grow up Sirius, let us know. Until then, we'll just leave the situation as it is," Lily spat angrily and crossed her arms. "But don't come crawling back on all fours when we won't speak to you!"

"Oh, well, fine!" Sirius got up. "I guess it's time to fulfil my duty as a Godfather." He walked to the door and just before he left, he looked back to see two slightly cheerful faces looking back at him. "But if that kid of yours starts to bite, I have to say that I'll bite back!" He went up the stairs muttering to himself, "Had to get in there, did I?"

A/N: Okay, Short chapter, I know. Next chapter hopefully will be coming soon (I have matriculation exams this month and I hope I could write in the evenings). That was just something that was sitting in my head for quiet a while, but I didn't know how to start it. At first, I thought I will start it from the beginning of Harry's first year, but then I got that Rebel!Harry idea, and I put it all together, and here is the result!

So, did you like it? What do you think? What should happen next? I already wrote the draft for the second chapter and it's a conversation between Harry and Sirius, and you'll find out what's really going on with Harry. But I still don't mind getting some ideas for it, 'cause I'm not very happy with what I wrote...

Please don't flame me for making Harry out of character, but you must remember that it's my story, meaning I'm making the plot and changing the characters the way I want, and if you don't like it, you don't have to read it, but still thank you for reading the first chapter! Also, please note that in the summery I wrote "what would have happen if..."

Chapter 2 – Boys Talk:

Sirius stopped in front of Harry's bedroom door. What should I say? He thought. Nothing came to mind. He figured that if he were to walk back downstairs, James and Lily would never speak to him again. He sighed deeply and knocked twice on the door.

"What?" Harry's voice answered angrily.

"Er... Harry? May I come in?" Sirius asked hesitantly, loud enough for Harry to hear him through the door.

"Nope," Harry called back.

"Come on, I want to talk to you."

"But I don't wanna talk to you."

"Harry—" Sirius was getting a bit annoyed talking to him through the door.

"You just wanna tell me what my parents couldn't."

Gosh, this kid is more clever than I thought... What to do? What to do? He stood there, facing the door, his eyes moving around for an idea. He couldn't think of anything but trying to talk to him again. But he won't open the door... he kept thinking, but then he realized that this situation could be fixed. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at the lock. "Alohomora!"

The door opened and Sirius walked slowly inside. He saw Harry lying flat on his stomach on his bed. He didn't say anything to Sirius after he entered his room without his permission, in fact he didn't say or do anything at all. He just laid there, head on the pillow, facing the wall.

Sirius sat slowly next to Harry's stilled body and looked at the floor. After a few moments of silence he said, "So, what's up?"

"I hate them," Harry said furiously, more to himself than to Sirius. "I hate the way they talk to me, the way they think I'm a child who can't

handle anything. I hate when they think I'm hopeless, someone who must get help. They never try to understand what it's like to be me!"

"Well, what it's like?"

Harry sat up straight. Neither of them wanted to look at the other's eyes yet. "It sucks. They don't trust me. They always think I'm against them."

"But they don't –"

"So why are they acting like that? Trying to push me to be someone I'm not. I'm happy the way I turned out, but they'll never understand that, will they?"

"Your parents are worried about you, Harry, and you're not showing them any respect. I understand you sometimes get mad at them, everyone is like that at this age..." Sirius couldn't believe he had this parental side in him, but he kept going with it.

Harry got up of the bed and began to walk around the room. "What do you know?" he spat.

"Believe me, I know." Sirius thought of the old times when he was in Harry's age. "You know, you're not as pureblood as you wish you were, like your friends are. You have to deal with it. It's been 16 years. You can't call your mother a 'Mudblood' every time you're mad at her! There's no reason in the world to treat her like that! You're her son and you really hurt her."

Harry stopped pacing around the room. For the first time since Sirius entered his room, he dared to look in his eyes. Sirius tried his best not to look back at him, but it was what Harry said that made him finally look up.

"Why all of the sudden are you trying to talk to me? We have never had conversations like this before." Harry began to investigate.

Sirius sighed again. "I'm here to start acting like a caring Godfather. I realized I haven't been there for you, and I want to make it up to you."

"Oh, yeah? How are you gonna do that?"

"Well, I haven't given you your birthday present yet," he replied smiling, but to his surprise, Harry just frowned.

"You'd do that?"

"Yeah, you know, my Harley Davidson is a little out of use..."

"You want to give me your flying motorcycle?" Harry's eyebrow shot up.

"Yeah, and it's in good condition. I actually got it when I was on your age."

Harry laughed for a second. "James and Lily will never let me ride on that thing –"

Now it was Sirius' turn to frown. "James and Lily? Since when do you call them by their first names?" Sirius asked.

Harry just shrugged.

"So you want it?" Sirius asked again.

"You really mean it? You're really going to give it to me?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Hu-ha," Sirius nodded. "But – on one condition..."

"Ha! I knew there's a catch! It was too good to be true," Harry said. "What is it?"

"Well, I'll give you my Harley if you promise to show your parents respect." Harry shifted in his place. Sirius went on, "You won't call them by their first names, or other insults, but only as 'Mum' and 'Dad', and if they're annoying you, you can always come to me..."

Harry was tired of listening to Sirius lecture. "You know what? Just keep that Harley for yourself and get the fuck out. If you really cared, you would talk to them and not me!"

"Watch your tongue!" Sirius said loudly.

"You know why I got so pissed off earlier? Because they told me again not to hang out with Draco and Blaise! I mean, they're my best friends and I can't even see them over the holidays, I can't send them letters because they took Hedwig and I can't invite them to my fucking 16th birthday!" Sirius yelled at Harry for swearing again, but Harry didn't care. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"You know how sensitive your mother is about you being a Slytherin, when she and your father both were in Gryffindor."

"Well, it's been bloody 6 years since I was sorted into Slytherin and I'm fine there! I've got great friends and great grades. Have you seen my O.W.L.S. results? I got four O's!"

"I know you're okay with that, but cut them some slack, will you? Try to be a good son. They are only trying to help you... They're actually afraid of you, afraid that you'll betray them and join the dark side, become a –"

"A Death Eater?" Harry finished his sentence. "Don't worry, I won't do that. I may be friends with a Death Eater's son, but that doesn't mean Draco will become like his father and I'll follow suit. Draco already told me that he won't take the mark, no matter what his father will do to him..."

Flashback:

"What! Why? I'm –"

"Harry, just let us show you that the Sorting Hat was wrong and that you belong into Gryffindor," Lily said.

"I'm never wrong," said the Sorting Hat with its hoarse voice, which Dumbledore was holding in midair.

"Shut up," James said distractedly to the hat. "Just write another song or something to keep you busy for a while."

"Attitude like this was the thing that kept me doubt about where you belong, Mr. Potter," said the hat back to James and everyone's attention was now at it. "You were too, could have done well in Slytherin, like I told you on the time you wore me in your first year..."

"James!" Lily shrieked.

"But as your son put me on his head, I had no doubt. Slytherin was the right house for him. Clever and cunning he was, always was ambitious. Like I said, I'm never wrong with my decisions, you're son is a true Slytherin."

End of Flashback.

"I got sorted into Slytherin because dad was supposed to end up in there..." Harry said.

"I'm glad he didn't. Gryffindor could be such a great place for you. You could have had great friends there –"

"Oh yeah, like poor Weasel and that Mudblood Granger – the 'Odd Couple'..." Harry joked.

"Don't say that word!" Sirius hissed.

"Sorry," Harry said, and for a change, he really meant it. "Okay, so it's a deal. You give me your Harley and I will be more grateful to them, but only if they'll accept my friends and me being a Slytherin."

"Okay. I think we can all accept a compromise." Sirius finally stood up from the bed and held his hand up to Harry. Harry hesitated for a second, but shook it. "Well, come on, I saw your plate was half full, so I'm sure you're hungry."

Sirius moved toward the door, waiting for Harry to follow him.

"You have no idea. I had to lie on my stomach just not to feel it aching."

Sirius chuckled a little. "Okay. Well, first thing before we enter the kitchen, we need to get your mother's lipstick and write 'SORRY' on your forehead..." Harry laughed. "Yeah, I heard what your father said..."

Harry walked out of his room with Sirius. "Oh, and don't forget to tell them about my new Harley Davidson..."

"Yeah... Let's just wait a couple of days until things cool down..." Sirius said. The thought of James and Lily's faces when they'll hear about it made him feel a little bit nervous. "So, how's my first day as a Godfather?"

"Not too bad..." Harry said, smiling at him.

A/N: So, Harry was acting like a teenager after all, but with a mix of being a Slytherin. Hope you liked it! Chapter 3 will come soon.

Chapter 3 – The Ride on the Train:

The summer holidays passed by eventually. Harry had to spend it with his parents and their friends. And when they went to work or did some arranging (they didn't tell him what exactly they were doing), he was left alone. Afraid I might tell someone, of course, he thought to himself.

He found himself getting along with them just fine. No more fights, no more yelling and cursing. They let him send letters to his friends, but he was still not allowed to meet them until school started again. So when the first of September finally arrived, Harry couldn't have been more excited to meet his friends again, though he kept his cool.

"Be careful, honey" – "Okay, Mum." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Don't do any trouble, young man" – "You got it, Dad." He gave him thumbs up followed by a smile.

"We don't want to get letters telling us that you got detentions or skipped classes again" – "I'll do my best..." he murmured under his breath but nodded.

They escorted him to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ and said goodbye as he heard his friend calling his name.

Draco Malfoy was followed by his very cold looking father, Lucius. Lucius' nose shot up an inch when he saw the Potters. He gave them a very ugly smile that made him look really mean, but Harry didn't really care about him. Lucius Malfoy shot the Potters and their shaggy black dog sitting next to them, one last nasty look and walked away.

It was now 11 exactly, and clouds of steam and smoke started to fill the platform. Harry said one last goodbye to his parents and he and Draco got up onto the train as it started to move. Carbbe and Goyle appeared out of nowhere and volunteered to get their trunks into an empty compartment.

"We'll meet Blaise afterwards," Draco told Harry. "I need to go to the Prefect meeting."

"And what about me...?" Harry asked, quite disappointed that after all this time that he hadn't seen his best friend, he was going to stay alone for a while.

Draco pulled out something from his robes and handed it to Harry. It was a green and silver badge, not a Prefect badge, but a Quidditch Captain badge. "Congrats, you've been made Captain." Harry took the badge and stared at it. Not only was he the best Seeker Hogwarts had ever seen, and it was because of him Slytherin won every year the Quidditch Cup, he was now the team's Captain.

"Me...? C...Captain...?" he asked, still amazed at the news.

"Yeah, I know it's shocking," said Draco sarcastically. "Father tried to buy me the position, but I faced the truth – you're a better player than I am."

"So... why didn't I get the badge? Why did you have it?"

"Snape's mistake, I guess," he said and pulled something else out of his robe and gave it to him. It was a letter, inside an open envelope. "I got your letter, though it's my name on the envelope."

Harry read the writing on the envelope; indeed it said Mr. Draco Malfoy.

"Are you kidding me?" Harry asked suspiciously. Draco shook his head. In all the years Harry knew Draco, he never seen him so serious. He opened the letter and read:

Dear Mr. Potter.

We are pleased to inform you that you've been made the new Slytherin Quidditch Captain. Your new badge is inside this envelope.

Good luck!

Professor S. Snape, Head of Slytherin House,
and Professor A. Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"You're not kidding me..." he said, folding the letter and putting it inside his robes.

"Well, that's why you're coming with me. The Captains always go to the Prefect meetings. So put the badge on and let's go. We're already five minutes late."

The meeting was short. Everyone knew what to do, except the new fifth year Prefects who stayed behind while everyone else went to patrol the train. After about ten minutes of doing so and also making fun of first years and some defenseless Hufflepuffs, they went to find the compartment Crabbe and Goyle picked for them. They found it, but not before they found the three Gryffindors they had been dying to make fun of since the end of last year.

Draco slid open the compartment's door and leaned against the threshold. "Lookie, lookie," he said and smirked. Harry followed and smiled cunningly at the three before them.

"Oh great, speaking of the devil," said Weasley. "Oh, and followed by his girlfriend," he added as he saw Harry.

"See Weasley, that's not a very nice way to welcome the new Slytherin Quidditch Captain..." said Harry, looking bored as he ignored Ron's comment. He flicked with his fingers his new shining badge that was resting on his chest.

"Oh, yeah? You've been made Captain? Gosh, that's so great!" he said cynically, looking at Harry's new badge. His expression and tone changed immediately. "Well, I've got news for you, Potter, this year you're so gonna lose the Cup to us."

Draco and Harry exchanged looks and then laughed at this statement. "What makes you say that, Weasel?" Draco chuckled.

"We've got new a Seeker, a better Seeker," he said, his mouth spreading into a wide, proud smile.

"You can't choose a new Seeker over the summer holidays, it's against the rules. You have to do tryouts first," Harry said.

"Uh-uh," Ron shook his head. "Not when I'm the Captain. And besides, we already chose my sister as the new Seeker last year. She just hasn't played yet."

Harry looked around the compartment; next to Weasley's girlfriend, Granger, sat his younger sister. She looked back at him, her brown eyes filled with anger. "Is that right?" Harry asked her. "Well, I'm very looking forward to see how hard you will cry when I'll get the Snitch right under your big freckled nose," he smirked and he started laughing again, Draco joining him. The Weasley girl shot her head to the window and held a few tears back. "Come on, Draco, being around Mudbloods and Mudbloods lovers too much can ruin my reputation," he said and walked out with a fake yawn, he had enough seeing them in the Prefect meeting earlier, he didn't need a closer look at their ugly faces. Draco gave them his warning look – the one when he shoots his eyebrows up and smile devilishly – and walked out after Harry, and back to their own compartment.

"You know, his mother is also a Muggle-born!" Ron snapped and folded his arms. "He's probably not so proud of that."

"Ron, you really shouldn't worry about him. He's a git. Always was, always will be," Hermione said and sat next to him.

"Well, I didn't like the way he looked at the two of you; like he's planning something." He unfolded his arms and hugged Hermione. "No one will call my girl a Mudblood," he said and planted a kiss on Hermione's lips. "I just can't understand how he got into Slytherin? His parents both were in Gryffindor, they are both Aurors and he... he's hanging out with a bunch of Death Eaters' sons..."

Flashback:

Ron and Harry were in a middle of a conversation about Quidditch when the door of their compartment slid open. Three boys stood in the doorway. Harry recognized the one who stood in the middle as the boy he met at Diagon Alley. He had a pale face, grey eyes, a

pointed nose and a sleeked blond hair. The other two looked very dumb and fat. Standing on either side of the blond boy, they looked like his bodyguards.

"Is it true?" the pale boy said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?" he said, looking at Harry and trying to ignore Ron.

"Yes," Harry said. He looked again at his fat followers. The pale boy introduced them as Crabbe and Goyle, and then introduced himself as Draco Malfoy.

Ron chuckled at his name and Malfoy started to insult him. "No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children that they can afford." Ron looked slightly offended.

Malfoy turned to Harry. "You see, Potter, you don't want to make friends with the wrong sort of wizards. I can help you there," He held up his hand to shake Harry's.

Harry hesitated for a second. He knew Ron was watching him carefully. All his life Harry didn't really have a lot of friends and the friends he had were very unpopular, not like him at all. Finally, he had the opportunity to have friends with his own kind and level. Harry understood by the things Malfoy said about Ron that his family was quite poor. Why would he want to make friends with someone like that?

"I'm sure you will." Harry smiled and grabbed Malfoy's hand and shook it. Ron gaped and swallowed hard. Malfoy looked like he just won a prize.

"Uh... you know..." Ron stuttered. He stood up and started to gather his things. "I've forgotten to... er... to ask George something about the spell he gave me..." (A/N: "Sunshine, daisies..." LOL) And he walked out as quickly as he could. Draco took his seat and waved his hand to Crabbe and Goyle to leave them alone, and so they did.

Harry and Draco spent hours talking. Draco of course wanted to know the boy whose family defeated the Dark Lord, even if his own father supported him.

"I guess you're not too bad," he said to Harry after all the first years sorted into the four houses and they ended up in the same house. "Think what could have happened if I didn't show up to rescue you from Weasley... You could have been sorted into Gryffindor!" he and Harry laughed so hard that they knew that very second they were going to be good friends.

End of Flashback.

Harry sighed at the memory. He couldn't have been more grateful for Draco for being his best friend. He, Draco and Blaise kept talking about their lousy summer and their O.W.L.S. results as the train took them to Hogwarts.

The door of their compartment opened around four o'clock. Pansy Parkinson smiled from ear to ear at the look of her two favorite Slytherin boys (well, along with their two fat devoted suckers, Carbbe and Goyle and Blaise Zabini), then she turned to the most handsome boy she found in there. "Oh, Harry Sweetie!" she squealed, her irritating high pitched voice making them all shiver slightly. Harry was surprised at how she addressed him. She never called him a 'sweetie'. He gulped as she made her way inside the very crowded compartment and sat right on Harry's lap.

"Parkinson! Eww! Get off!" Harry yelled at her and pushed her away from him with disgust.

"But Harry Honey!" she said, whining. Harry knew too well that when Pansy was whining she was also about to start crying, and when she cried, she sounded like a tiny Chihuahua puppy (and really looked like one with her big black, wet eyes).

Pansy Parkinson was always head-over-heals for Harry. But he had never felt the same way for her. He couldn't even stand her and not to mention look at her doggish face. No matter how many times he turned her down, she always tried to catch his heart over and over again.

But Harry's heart never belonged to anyone. He never had been in love. Sure, he had been for a short time with a girl or two, who always chased him around, but they looked nice, not like Pansy.

"God, you're pathetic! Shove off!" Harry told her after she started to cry. He put his fingers deep in his ears so he couldn't hear her so-irritating whimpering. "And don't call me 'Honey', 'Sweetie' or any other nickname! Who knows what the consequences can be..."

She eventually left, but not before she promised him that this wasn't over. "Great..." he muttered under his breath.

"Harry Potter, heartbreaker," Draco teased him.

"Shut up..." Harry said in a low voice.

"Merlin, Harry," Blaise said, sounding worried for some reason. "I think you really hurt her. I know she can be a pain in the arse, but maybe you should've treated her with more respect. Be gentle next time..."

"Do me a favor, Blaise, if you're so interested in her, make a move and please do it fast!" Harry said. Blaise turned a little red around the ears and didn't say another word about Pansy Parkinson.

When they finally reached the Hogsmeade train station, they walked to the first horseless carriage they saw, and shoved aside the third years that were about to enter it. Crabbe and Goyle made sure they weren't going to fight for it with them and so they made their way to Hogwarts, ready to start their sixth year.

Next chapters: Why Sirius came to King Cross as a dog if he's a free man (and yes, he never went to Azkaban). How did Harry's parents survive and how did they vanquish the Dark Lord, and even more to come! All of this you'll find out next chapters but only if you'll REVIEW! Ask questions, make requests and suggestions, I don't care! Just press this little purple button down this page and write something! I really like to write this story, so please don't make me abandon it. Yours, LittleSinner ;)

Chapter 4 – Back to School:

The welcoming dinner was over, and Harry and Blaise made their way to the common room while Draco went to show the first years where to go along with the other prefects.

Blaise looked a little annoyed to see Draco walking with Pansy. Harry saw her clutching Draco's arm like he was her date or something. He knew that must be what made Blaise act like that. Harry chuckled as Draco pushed Pansy away from him like he did earlier on the train. While Blaise tried to ignore this, Harry knew that she did that only to make him (Harry) jealous, which only made him feel worse for poor, miserable Blaise.

"Aren't you pathetic," Harry said to his friend in a matter-of-fact voice and he rolled his eyes. They reached the dungeons and walked to the entrance to the common room.

"What's the password?" Blaise asked in a low voice, avoiding Harry's comment and looking shyly at the floor.

Draco pushed his way in front of the crowd, facing the empty wall. "Toxic Fang!" he uttered the password and a door in the wall slid open and everyone marched inside. Harry and Blaise sat in the high-backed chairs and waited for Draco, who continued showing the first years where the dormitories were.

He finally finished his duty and went to join them. "First years are so stupid," he said as he sank into his chair. "I can't believe we were that short when we first got here."

"Yeah..." Blaise said absentmindedly.

"What's up with Zabini?" Draco asked Harry, like Blaise wasn't even there with them.

"Oh, he's upset because Pansy's gluing to you now," Harry answered with an amused smile and turned to his other friend. "Listen Blaise, Pansy is just trying to get me to date her. She sees her plan isn't working so she's trying to make me get jealous by using Draco."

Blaise opened his mouth to say something but quickly closed it. Harry knew he wanted to ask why it's always had to be about only Draco or Harry, and not him, but Harry chose to let it go.

Harry and Draco started to talk about their plans for tomorrow, hoping they'd have Potions. "I've got an E in the Potions O.W.L," Draco said.

"Really? How? I didn't think it was possible, you know, for you to get less than an O... I mean, I got an O even though I failed almost all of Snape's tests, and you passed all of them last year," Harry said.

"I know, but I got distracted by something, I guess..." he replied. "I've got only three O's. Everything else is either E or A. Oh, and one P in Divination, but I mean, who passed that?"

"Not me," Harry said, shaking his head. "Trelawney is a fraud, if you ask me. I heard she never predicted even one true prediction. Anyway, I'm glad I'm not taking her class anymore."

"I bet Granger passed that O.W.L," Draco joked. "Bet she has all straight O's."

"Oh, she's not taking that class," Blaise said suddenly and startled both of his friends. After a while of not speaking, Harry and Draco really forgot he was there.

"How'd you know?" Harry and Draco asked in unison.

"Because she's in my Arithmancy class and she always talks about how it's more important than Divination. She left after the first few classes in third year."

"I never thought that she's capable of missing a subject," Harry joked now.

"Anyway," Draco said, getting back to the subject. He was sick talking too much about that Mudblood. "Father wasn't so pleased with my grades, he expected all straight O's, though mother was satisfied."

"I thought you said you don't give a damn about what your father says," Blaise said.

"I don't. He's perfectly aware that I won't follow his way and become a Death Eater. I mean, the Dark Lord died, what's the deal with serving him now? And did you see how he looked at your parents?" He now asked Harry.

Harry frowned. "I hate when he does that. He looked weird. He probably knew my Godfather was there... he probably recognized him, but couldn't do anything."

"Why did he come anyway? I thought it was risky for him to be seen by Death Eaters."

"That's why he was there in his Animagi form. He thought it would be safer that way," Harry answered. He remembered the first time he asked why Sirius had to transform himself into a dog. His parents explained to him everything that had happened...

Flashback:

It was already dark in Godric's Hollow and it was a typical October evening, and the Potters had enjoyed their Halloween celebrations until Lord Voldemort arrived.

Young Sirius Black was starting to get bored, sitting all alone in number 12 Grimmauld Place. The house elf was asleep, so Sirius couldn't make fun of him to entertain himself. He decided that it would be safe to make a Floo Call to his friend, Remus Lupin.

Sirius went to the dungeon kitchen, took some green Floo Powder, threw the powder inside the hearth and put his head in the fireplace as he called the address of Remus' home.

Sirius immediately saw his friend, though not as he expected to find him. Remus sat alone at drawing room, his face buried in the palms of his hands. He looked like he was after a full moon, pale and old, but it was only a week after the last time he transformed. His face was white and he looked sick and sweaty, and more paranoid than he usually was before a full moon, like someone was out to get him.

Remus got up from the couch he was sitting on and walked around the room, like he was lost and didn't know where to go. It was only then when he finally noticed Sirius' head sticking out of the fire.

"Moony? What's wrong?" Sirius asked, sounding concerned.

"It's Peter..." Remus sighed, sitting down in front of the fireplace, though he didn't look in Sirius eyes. "He was here just five minutes ago... He... He said something really... Oh, Merlin! Sirius, Peter sold James and Lily out!" he finally cried out as he covered his face again with his hands.

"What?" Sirius asked. He didn't understand his friend for a second, and from what he heard, if he heard right, it sounded like... no, he did not believe his ears! "But... Peter wouldn't!"

"But he did! He told me personally, just before he left. He's mad, Sirius, something has got into him! He couldn't stop laughing... he laughed so hollowly like it was a joke to him! Oh, Sirius, we need to do something, to help them before it's too late!"

"Where are they hiding? Did he say?"

Remus nodded. "Do you know a village called Godric's Hollow?"

"Yeah, I'll go there right away," Sirius said at once. "Try to contact Dumbledore, maybe he can help." And before Remus could say anything else, Sirius' head was gone.

Sirius ran out of his house, hopped on his motorcycle and flew to the Potters. He wouldn't let Voldemort kill his best friends and he swore he will revenge Peter for betraying them. 'How could Peter do this?' He thought as he flew to Godric's Hollow. 'How stupid could I've been to turn down James' offer! I could have been their secret keeper? Damn you, Peter!'

"Step aside, you fool. You better do so before you'll meet you death, Potter," the Dark Lord said as he faced James Potter, ready to duel

with him to his death. "You can't possibly think you can stand against me, do you?"

James kept his distance away from Voldemort. His wife was in the back room, putting a protection charm on their son. The more time James stalled, the better chance Lily had of making a stronger charm.

Curses and spells filled the house, seconds turned into minutes and every precious minute, a fraction of a second could be the final one. The house around them began to crumble. Shelves and furniture fell down from their places; walls had been snapped with great, black holes where the spells hit, causing fractures to shoot right back at them.

Voldemort got sick of playing with James. He wanted to shoot the Killing Curse at him so he could move on. He knew it would be easier if James wasn't ready to curse him back. When he caught James off guard, he thought it would be the best time to take action. "Accio Wand!" he called and James' wand shot to his hand.

James looked horror struck. He didn't know what to do or where to go. He was defenseless, and there was a good chance he could die at any second. But he didn't fear his own death. He feared for Lily and Harry's lives. He needed to protect them, but he knew Voldemort was right; he has no chance against him, not without a wand anyway. He was going to die and there was no escape. He gulped hard, trying to swallow the lump that had built up in his throat and stood straight, ready to receive his fate.

Voldemort was smirking at him with a smug look on his ugly face, ready to strike. James closed his eyes shut, thinking maybe this way he wouldn't feel a thing. And all this time he was thinking about his dear family and how he wanted to save them, but couldn't.

Voldemort slowly pointed his wand at James and opened his mouth to say the curse he wanted so badly to say that night.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

A flash of green light filled the room and a man's body dropped dead to the ground. But it wasn't James' body. For all he knew, he was still breathing. He slowly opened his eyes, only to see his best friend, Sirius Black, standing in the doorway, breathing heavily. He had obviously hurried himself over there before it was too late.

James slowly looked down at the floor. Voldemort's body was sprawled and lifeless.

"It's over," James said, panting and almost not believing he was alive.

"It's not over until I'll hunt down Peter... It was he who..."

"I know," James said.

Hagrid appeared at the wrecked house about fifteen minutes after it all happened and explained that Remus had contacted Dumbledore and told him everything, so he sent him to help, while he was going to alert the Minister of Magic. He helped them with Voldemort's body and took him to the Ministry, while Sirius went to look for Peter.

End of Flashback.

Peter Pettigrew had never been seen since that night. And though the all Order of the Phoenix had searched for him to this day, he was still alive and well, as Harry been told. That traitor, who called himself their friend, turned his back on Harry's parents and gave information to Voldemort so he could kill them all. Lucky for them, Sirius got there in time to save them and the whole world from the most evil wizard ever existed, and that was the reason why he was hiding from old servers of Voldemort, though the Ministry awarded him for that and hadn't even sentenced him to Azkaban for using the Killing Curse.

Harry's parents and godfather told him Sirius would have to stay in dog form in public so the Death Eaters wouldn't find him and try to avenge their lord's death. Some of them were still free, and others were caught during a raid on Death Eater activity in a Muggle town a year ago.

Harry cleared his mind and went back to reality. He and his friends stayed up, talking about their O. results. When Harry had the chance

he told them about the flying motorcycle Sirius gave him for his birthday, which made his two best friends envy him a little, even Draco, who supposedly had everything money could buy.

The common room emptied a little as the time passed by and they felt quite tired around midnight, though Harry felt like he could keep talking with them for hours, to make up for the time he hasn't seen them. But then Draco got up from his seat. "I'm going to bed," he declared with a yawn, as he started to head for the boys dormitories.

"It's still early," Harry said, trying to squeeze in more time with them.

"Yeah... I'm going to sleep, too," Blaise said, also getting up.

"All right, all right..." Harry gave up and they called it off for the night.
Whatever Star: Thank you! I won't let it die as long as people will review it. I haven't thought about it, but I guess I can always put it in... Wait... let me think about it... Alright, it makes perfect combination with the story, so I may use it. If you have other ideas, please share them with me. I'm not writing this for myself, you know, it's always for the readers!

A/N: (1) Just wanted to say that this story might have a romance for Harry in later chapters, it won't take a big part from the plot, but it will still have a romance in it, just a little. ;)

(2) If you guys like this story, can you please recommend it to others? You know, anonymous readers can also review, so bring a friend to join the party!

And now review the chapter and the next one will come before Tuesday, I already written it, so it depends on you guys! Love you all!

Chapter 5 – Detention with a Weasley:

"Welcome to the N.E.W.T. Potions class," Professor Snape said in a drawling voice at their first class they had the following morning. "I expected to have fewer pupils in my class this year, but I guess some of you realized before your O.W.L.s last year that Potions is no picnic. If you thought that an A, E or O grade in your O.W.L.s exam was enough for you to pass the N.E.W.T.s exam then you're wrong," he said, walking up and down the class and shooting threatening glances at a few scared Gryffindors. "This year is going to be the toughest year you've had so far and if you don't practice doing potions correctly and learn the theoretical material by heart, I can assure you right here and now that you will fail the N.E.W.T.s exam and that there is no reason for you to stay, unless you want to fail..."

The potion lesson today wasn't so hard, Harry thought. He compared his own to Granger's and was sure that both potions looked the same and that they were both good.

After the bell rang and ended the double period they had, Snape called Harry to stay behind. After Harry saw that all the students left the classroom, including Blaise and Draco, who said that they'd meet him at lunch, Harry approached Snape.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Potter. I wanted to know when you are planning to set tryouts for the team," Snape responded.

"Huh?" Harry asked dumbly, but then he understood that Snape was probably talking about Quidditch, since he was the new team's Captain. "Oh! Er... I dunno. Maybe Friday night, I guess. I haven't really thought about it yet."

"Then Friday night it is. I'll sign for the pitch between 7 to 9 P.M.. Is that a good time?"

"Yeah, it's great," Harry answered. "Should I put a note on the notice board, sir?"

"If you may, I've got loads of work to do and Quidditch is the last thing on my mind right now."

"Okay then, I will," Harry assured him.

"All right, off you go."

Harry turned around from Snape's desk and made his way towards the door, but stopped when a thought popped in his mind. He turned around and looked back at his greasy, black haired Professor. "Excuse me, sir, can I ask you something?"

"What is it Potter?" Snape asked, not facing Harry, and carrying on writing something on a parchment.

"I... I wanted to know why you chose me to be... the team's Captain." Now Snape finally abandoned his business and turned his face to look at Harry. "I mean, I'm honored, and let me assure you that I'll do a great job as Captain and do my best to train the team so we'll win the Cup, but... there's something on my mind that's bothering me a bit..."

"And that thing is...?" Snape looked quite annoyed that Harry spoke a whole speech and distracted him.

"I'm not your favorite student, let's face it, and I almost always fail your tests, so why did you chose me as the Captain and not Draco for instance?"

"As much as I hate your parents, Potter," Harry of course already knew that tiny fact, but it didn't matter to him. "I trust you completely and I know you're different from them. I mean, look at you, you're a Slytherin but they were Gryffindors, that's the first thing that makes you different from them. I chose you because you're cunning and clever, even if you don't admit it. And the last thing that made me sure that you're right for the position was that you're the best Quidditch player and Seeker Slytherin has seen in years. That's why I chose you. Did you really think that I would prefer Mr. Malfoy? No offense to your friend, of course, but he's not as good player as you," Snape finished his speech. Harry looked surprise to hear for the first

time in his life Snape complimenting him. Snape continued to look at him, as Harry hadn't said a word and he looked like he hoped he (Harry) had heard him because he didn't want to repeat it all over again. "Do you understand?" he asked, finally pulling Harry back to reality.

"Y...yes, sir. Thank you," he said and walked out of the classroom.

He went to join his friends for lunch in the Great Hall and told them what Snape had wanted.

Blaise looked overenthusiastic about something for some reason and it started to annoy Harry. "What are you so excited about today?" he asked him curiously, but Blaise was jumping in his seat. "Can you calm down? I'm trying to eat here!" Blaise stopped jumping but kept on smiling from ear to ear and continued to gaze in air, daydreaming. He didn't answer Harry, like he hasn't heard anything he said. "Hello? Blaise...?" Harry asked, waving a hand in front of his friend's face. Blaise didn't wake up from his daydream. "Did a Dementor kiss him or something?" he now turned to Draco, after giving up.

"Almost. To be precise, the Dementor's name is Pansy Parkinson," Draco said as he read the headlines of the Daily Prophet and chewed his food at the same time.

"What?" Harry asked, suddenly sounding surprised for an unknown reason. Is this another plan of Pansy to make him jealous? By using poor Blaise now? (Not that Blaise seemed to mind...) Did she always have to use his friends?

"Oh, didn't you notice in class earlier? His dear precious Pansy allowed him to sit next to her," Draco answered with a smirk on his lips.

"That's all?" Harry asked with a mocking chuckle and Draco nodded. And he thought it was getting out of hand! "Okay... this is fixable; we still can have our old Blaise back. Hey, Crabbe!" Harry called, looking for one of their dumb and fat followers. Crabbe raised his head from his plate and looked at Harry with a questioning look on his face. "Next Potions class you sit next to Pansy Parkinson, okay?"

Crabbe just shrugged his shoulders carelessly and went back to stuffing food into his mouth. Harry noticed that when he called out Pansy's name, Blaise woke up from his daydream and looked around. Now Blaise held a horror-struck look on his face and looked at Harry, who looked back at him and Draco with a triumph smile playing on his lips. Blaise stared at him opened-mouthed and Draco tried to suppress a laugh.

"Wha...? Why...? What'd you that for?" Blaise asked Harry in shock.

"And he can talk!" Draco joked. Harry sniggered but then tried to look serious as he talked to Blaise.

"You need to get over that girl, man. Forget her. You can do much better than that. Believe me, it's for your own good. It's not healthy to obsess over some girl like that... especially if it's Parkinson..." Harry added a disgusted look to his words.

"To hell with health! You ruined my chances with her!" he protested.

"Okay, Blaise," Draco folded his paper and put it aside and turned to Blaise. "Reality check – Parkinson does not give a damn about you!"

"Yeah, sorry mate, but you know it's me she wants. I'll be more than glad to let you have her but let's face it, when she's obsessed with someone, she'll turn the world upside down just to have him. Do you remember what she did to Marcus Flint a few years ago? Even though he was a little older than her? She made him miserable until he gave up, polyjuiced a frog to look like him and let her kiss it just so she would leave him alone," he said and then mumbled to himself, "Umm... maybe I should do that too..."

"I think the frog died an hour later. Poor thing, never knew what was coming..." Draco made the comment with a sarcastic smile.

"I don't care!" Blaise ignored Draco and retorted back to Harry. "Let her use me, just so I could have her for one minute!" He said and then his face froze. "Hold on a sec, did you say something about Quidditch tryouts?"

"Yeah... On Friday night, I thought you didn't hear. Why, you want to tryout?"

"That would be cool, don't you think?" Blaise said. He looked like a lightening bulb had been lit above his head, meaning he had an idea. "That way, Pansy will notice what a great Chaser I am. And everyone knows the Chaser gets more attention than any other player on the team, right?" he asked, more to himself than his friends, but Draco answered cynically, "Oh yeah, sure!" and rolled his eyes.

Harry just shook his head disbelievingly and knew that Blaise was, for the time being, hopeless.

But he wasn't finished there. Blaise decided that Harry had gone too far, so he told them after the bell rang, that he didn't want to speak to them for a while because they were supposed to help him with stuff like that. So he walked out alone to their next class, without saying anything else to them.

"Oh, great..." Draco mumbled. "Had to say that, didn't you?"

"Oh, of course, blame me with all of this!" Harry retorted, quite annoyed.

"Well, you started it! You told him –"

"I did not!"

"Did too!"

"No arguing in the hallways," a voice said calmly. Unfortunately, this voice belonged to Hermione Granger, as she passed them by on their way to class.

"Filthy Mudblood..." both Draco and Harry said in unison under their breaths and they calmed down at once. Harry noticed he used again the 'M' word he promised to Sirius he wouldn't use again, but he couldn't help it. When he was around his friends, he was a whole new person.

"Okay, so how long do you reckon he won't talk to us?" Harry asked, trying to focus back on 'The Blaise Issue'.

Draco smirked and said, "It wouldn't take long... I think we'll survive his silence until dinner," he said and they both tried to suppress another laugh...

The first Quidditch practice took place on the second weekend after school had started. Harry's team had already drawn up tryouts for the three missing Chasers.

Blaise was excellent. Harry wondered why he never tried to be a player on the team if he was so good at dodging Bludgers and score the Quaffle through the goal posts, because he got the position immediately. And as for the other two chasers, they were good and fast, but not as good and fast as Blaise was.

Harry was also glad that Blaise didn't mention Pansy since the first day of school and he was sure he was over her now.

Slytherin, as always, 'stole' the pitch from the other teams for their practice (of course they had Snape's permission with them, using the excuse that they needed to train their new chasers, but it still counted as stealing and they were proud of it, or so they were thought to be. When Harry and his teammates came out of the changing room and walked down the pitch, they saw the last thing they've expected that day. Gryffindor's team was already playing in the air.

Crabbe and Goyle suggested knocking them off their brooms and the rest of the team supported that plan, but not Harry. He stopped them at the last second before they soared into the air. Truly, Harry was mad at the Gryffindors for taking their time at the pitch, but before he let them know that they made a very big mistake, he wanted to see how strong their team was. He wanted to see their moves, their players, and their tactics. From what he could see, their team has improved since last year, and honestly, they were indeed a good team.

Harry scanned the sky for their Seeker, but he couldn't find that little red-headed girl. He started to look for her around the pitch, right when a flash of gold crossed his eyes, and one second later he was knocked to the ground by someone.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, clutching the back of his head, where he felt a sharp pain followed by what might have been blood that dripped forcefully inside of his grip.

"Got it!" the Weasley girl called from up the air. Harry opened his eyes and saw her flying about 12 feet above him, the Snitch was held tightly in her hand. He saw her freckled face shoot him a sneering look, and then she poked her tongue out at him, just before all of the Gryffindor team flew to meet her.

"Good one, Ginny!" Ron Weasley clapped on his sister's back and laughed lightly.

Draco and Blaise helped Harry to get up. He quickly seized his wand from his back pocket. He didn't mind that his head was bleeding; he wanted her to pay for the pain she caused him. He wanted to fly up and start to shoot curses at her, but he felt everyone holding him back. The scene around him started to spin. He suddenly felt very weak, his body was sloppy and he lost the grip on his broom and wand that were in his hands, and he fell to the ground. Darkness taking over him as he fainted.

"Oh look, he's waking up," Blaise's voice said from a great, great distance. Harry opened his eyes to see himself lying on a bed in the hospital wing. Even though he thought Blaise and Draco stood near the door, they were actually sat right next to his bed.

Draco explained what happened. "I – I fainted?" Harry asked, stunned, after he heard the whole story. He never, ever lost consciousness before. He reached up to where the pain was still fresh and felt bandages wrapped around his forehead. "What's that?" he asked, at first confused, but then he realized that his head must still be bleeding.

Madam Pomfrey entered the ward from her office. "Mr. Potter, I see you're awake now. I need to be sure that you don't have to stay here

overnight and then you can leave. How many fingers am I holding up?" She held up three fingers and a thumb, from what Harry could see. He hoped he was right. He didn't want to spend the night in this place. He barely ever stepped inside the infirmary, only when one of the team's players got hit by a Bludger or something, so he went to visit him with the rest of the team.

"Four?" he tried to sound like he was sure of what he saw.

"Are you guessing or do you really see me holding up four fingers?" she asked.

"I see you holding three fingers and a thumb. Now, am I right and I can leave or do I need to tell you what color your shoes are?"

She pouted and put her hands on her hips. "I'm not appreciating your attitude, Mr. Potter, but you may leave."

Harry sat upright in the bed and reached again to his head to take off the bandages.

"What are you doing?" Madam Pomfrey asked. "You can't take them off until tomorrow morning, I'm sorry," she didn't sound like she was sorry.

"I can't walk around with these things on my head!" he complained.

"Well, you have to. Goodbye."

Harry had to hurry to the common room as fast as he could. Draco and Blaise may look innocent, but he knew they made fun of him behind his back. He didn't care that they would see him like this, just as long as nobody else would.

"Oh, that's attractive."

Harry cringed his teeth at the sound of the voice. Dreams snapped, hopes shattering into small pieces!

Weasley and Granger stood together at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall. Weasley smirked at him and looked very pleased with what his sister did to him.

"Shut up, Weasel! It's all your sister's fault! She did that on purpose!" Harry said, defending himself.

"Oh, yeah? Try to prove it!" he shot back.

"When I see her... I swear..." His temper was rising now.

"If you lay one finger on my sister, your head isn't the only thing going to be wrapped in bandages," Weasley said threateningly.

"Leave him alone, Ron. I think the bandages looking quite nice on him... It's like a new hat, don't you think so?" The Weasley girl emerged from nowhere and now stood next to her brother, crossing her arms over her chest, a defeating smile across her lips.

"You...! You filthy little Weasel!" Harry spat. He couldn't take this anymore. No one would make fun of him or threaten him without getting punished. He reached for his wand and pulled it out, pointing it at the three Gryffindors standing in front of him.

"Harry, stop!" a man's voice called. Harry turned around, startled to see Remus Lupin, his Defense against the Dark Arts teacher and also one of his parents' best friends standing on the stairs behind him. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Trying to attack three defenseless Gryffindors!" he said as he came down a few stairs.

"What? How can you take their side? They started it! His sister is the reason my head is all wrapped in bandages! Ask Draco and Blaise, they saw it, too!"

Draco and Blaise nodded to Lupin. He turned to look at the three Gryffindors. They all shook their heads in unison and looked innocent. "They're lying!" Harry said. "Do you think I really have time to attack these idiots whenever I feel like it?"

"Okay, you two," he pointed to the two Weasleys, "And you, Harry, to my office – Now."

They all walked in silence to the second floor, where Lupin's office was. Nobody dared to say anything or looked each other in the eye, until they entered the office. Lupin made them stand side by side and then started to ask questions, or actually, to demand answers.

"Harry, tell me what happened."

Harry started to tell him about what happened that afternoon, about how the Weasley girl knocking him on the ground and made him lose consciousness.

"Okay, Ginny, is that true? Did you do it on purpose?"

"No, I was after the Snitch, it just happened to go right in front of him. It was an accident," she answered.

"Which this reminds me, they stole the pitch from us today!" Harry interfered, pointing a finger at them.

"We did not!" Ron protested and he and his sister started to get into a row with Harry, each side claiming they had signed for the pitch first.

"Okay, quiet everyone!" Lupin shouted with his hoarse voice and the room was quiet again. "Ginny, you could have avoided crashing into Harry, right?" She nodded. "Then why didn't you?" She shrugged and looked at the floor, circling the stone with the toe of her shoe. "Then it was on purpose," Lupin said and she nodded again, facing the floor and stopped circling it with her shoe.

"And did you have anything to do with it?" Lupin turned to Ron.

"No, I swear. I only teased him earlier, but that's all," he said innocently.

"Ha-ha," Lupin sounded like he reached a decision. "I don't like taking points off the houses and certainly not giving out punishments, but I'll

easy you with this one. Ginny, detention for you tomorrow night for what you did to Harry. And no excuses of how much he deserved it! I'll talk to you tomorrow morning to let you know when and where your detention will be set. You two may go back to your common room now, not wandering the hallways."

"Yes, sir," the two Gryffindors said and went out of the office. Harry was triumphant that she got punished and he wasn't, though he hoped her brother would get a detention too, but hey, you can't eat the cake and keep it whole, right?

"Now, about you Harry," Lupin said. "From what I saw, you just broke some of the school rules yourself. No using spells in the hallways, no attacking other students and there are a few more, but let's spare the details. I'm sorry, but I have to be fair and objective, so a detention for you too tomorrow night."

Harry nodded quietly. He turned back to exit the room, but then Lupin stopped him. "Wait, I think it will be best if you inform your parents about today's events, including the detention you just got."

Harry nodded again and headed back to his common room. Somehow, it seemed fair to give him a punishment too. He just didn't know why.

Lupin caught Harry at lunch the next day and told him that his detention would be at 7P.M. with Professor Snape in his office. Harry was disappointed to hear that. He knew Snape's detentions were the worst, and he hoped the Head of his House would not hear about it somehow. After all, he said he trusted him completely and he didn't want to let him down after only two weeks. But he had no choice. Ditching a detention from Snape was the worst thing one could do.

Harry arrived at Snape's office couple of minutes after 7. He sighed before he knocked twice on the door, and when he heard Snape calling him to come in, he pressed down the handle and walked inside the room.

He didn't expect to see her there. The Weasley girl, sitting in one of the chairs in front of Snape's desk and glaring back at him, looking

like she wasn't so pleased to see him. Harry shot her back the same look. What is she doing here? he thought to himself, but then remembered that Lupin gave her a detention, too.

"Come in, Mr. Potter, close the door behind you, please," Snape drawled and Harry did as he was told.

"I thought I was doing this detention alone," she said to Snape. The truth was that Harry was also sure that he would be doing this detention alone. That it would be just him and Snape. He would have preferred to do it with a whole bunch of Gryffindors instead of this particular one.

"Well, I guess you were wrong, Ms. Weasley. You will be here with Mr. Potter." Snape bent down and took a bucket of water and two sponges from the floor and placed them on his desk. "My office needs a little wash," he said with an evil grin. "You will clean it with these sponges, and of course, without using magic. I have some things to take care of, so you'll be here alone for awhile. I'll be back shortly and when I do, I want to see you both on floor, scraping and polishing it very nicely so when I look down at it, I will see my reflection. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"Good luck," he said as he rose from his desk and left the office.

Ginny took the bucket of water and put it on the floor. She didn't look at Harry, though he had watched her since he entered the room. She had her hair tied in a high ponytail, and she still wore her school uniforms. She sat on her knees and started to scrape the floor with a sponge. Her skirt was short and almost revealed more than Harry was supposed to see.

She noticed he was looking at her and gave him a very angry look. "Are you going to do something or do I need to tell Snape that you just watched me do all the work by myself all the while he was gone?" she spat.

Harry rolled his eyes at her and kneeled next to her, taking the other sponge in his hand and starting to scrape the floor. "Chill with the temper," he muttered under his breath.

"I heard that," she said in through gritted teeth.

"Argh!" Harry had enough. Even though he was scraping the floor for less than ten seconds, he couldn't stand being in the same room with this girl. He threw his sponge, stood up and started to pace around the room. He couldn't leave, because then Snape would let Filch hang him upside-down in the entrance hall, so he stayed. "I can't believe I have to spend a detention with a —"

"With what?" she asked firmly, also standing up and reaching his eyes level. "With a Weasel? With a shame for purebloods? With Muggle-lover? With a red-head? With a Gryffindor? Come on, Potter, say what you had in mind! I don't care because I already heard it all! You're such an arse!"

Her dark brown eyes burned with rage. Harry couldn't stare at them for long, fearing he might lose himself inside of them.

"Oh yeah?" he retorted, feeling his own temper rising just above the average and his heart starting to bit faster than usual. "Well, you are the most unbearable person I ever met!"

She absentmindedly took a small step towards him and sharpened her gaze at him. "You are the most self-centered, arrogant human being I even came across!"

"OH YEAH?" he yelled.

"YEAH!" she matched her voice to his tone level. "You're a foul, little scumbag, that's what you are! I think you're the most irritating person in the world!"

"Well, I think you're the most..." he started to shout back, but then he looked down at her eyes. Tears were beginning to form in them. He wasn't sure if they were tears of anger or tears of some sort of pain, he just knew that he didn't want to see tears in those gorgeous brown

eyes of hers. He suddenly saw something in her that he didn't see before. She was pretty, more than pretty. It was indescribable and he couldn't resist the words escaping his mouth. "The most beautiful and incredible person I ever seen..." His voice was now weak and almost like a whisper.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Ginny was ready to respond back with another rebuke. She opened her mouth to insult him back, but then realized what he said. The truth was that Harry didn't regret saying those things to her, even though it was an accident.

"W...what?" she asked, bewildered.

He didn't answer her. He didn't want to repeat it once again, for fear that he just couldn't say those words again. He just closed his eyes and leaned over, placing his lips on hers.

Ginny was in shock. She blinked her wide-open eyes once, but didn't cooperate on kissing him back. After what seemed like 30 seconds or more had passed, and neither of them pulled back, she realized what was going on. Was he using her? It seemed to her that he was. She let a few tears roll down her cheeks as the thought sank in. She decided that she won't let anyone, especially not Harry Potter, use her.

She pulled back and looked at his eyes. His emerald green eyes were studying her own. He was waiting for her to say something because she was the one who stopped the kiss. But she didn't say anything, but only slapped him hard on the cheek.

"Oww!" he cried, holding his aching cheek and then turning back slowly to face her. She looked tentatively at him and he didn't expect her next move. Instead of walking away, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to kiss him again. Her lips crashed hard against his this time, taking them into one passionate kiss.

Harry was confused. One minute, they were yelling at each other, the second he was kissing her, then she pulled back and slapped him, but in the end she kissed him back.

Ginny was also confused, even more confused than Harry. Why was she kissing him? She told herself not to let him use her. Only this was the boy she had a crush on ever since she saw him on platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ when Ron left for school. But when she heard he was sorted into Slytherin, she told herself – no, she forced herself – to forget him. She never was able to forget him completely, even when he cursed her, her family and her friends, she always found him so attractive and good-looking. But what was on the inside? She never knew...

"Hem-hem," Snape cleared his throat when he saw the scene before him. Harry and Ginny parted immediately and looked at Snape innocently.

Snape's dark and cold eyes moved to look from Harry to Ginny for a short and quiet minute, before he finally looked at Ginny. "Ms. Weasley, you may go now. I think you've done enough for tonight... maybe too much than what was asked from you..." Snape said coldly. Ginny nodded quietly and without a glance back at Harry she left the office.

Snape walked towards Harry, who gulped with difficulty. Snape watched him closely as he walked around him. Harry felt nervous by that and looked at the floor.

"Potter," Snape finally said, causing Harry to jump. "Can I ask what was what I saw now happening in my office?"

"Er..." Harry tried to find something to say, but he was too nervous to speak. "I... I'm sorry, sir," he calmed down a little and managed to say. "It won't happen again, sir. I... I think she did something to me... She must have put some sort of a spell on me. I'll be more aware next time."

"All right. I shall have a talk with Professor McGonagall about her. You, too, may leave now. You're excused from this detention."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry walked out of Snape's office, feeling relieved that he didn't punish him, not that he had the right to, but this was Snape, and he could have kept Harry cleaning his office all night long, alone.

He hurried to the Great Hall, to get some leftovers for his missing dinner. He felt someone placing a hand on his shoulder, so he turned around to see Ginny Weasley looking very pissed. Before he knew what was going to happen, she kneed him in the groin and said, "Put a spell on you, hua?" and ran away with tears in her eyes, leaving him curled on the floor like a ball and whimpering from pain. "Damn you, Weasley," he said to himself after everything cooled down and he found his voice again.

All right, now repeat after me: R, E, V, I, E, W! That's right, now you will be reviewing this chapter, because I spent really long time writing it and I really worked hard on it, so please tell me what you think, it's really important to me and it helps me to see how the next chapters will be like. Hoped you enjoyed! Love you all, LittleSinner!

Chapter 6 – Harry's Punishments:

Ginny went straight to the Gryffindor common room. She was relieved to see that it was empty because everyone else was still at dinner. She sat on an armchair at the farthest corner of the room and crossed her arms around her knees.

She sat there alone, thinking, for what seemed like hours, but every time she looked at her watch she saw that the time had barely passed by.

How could she make the stupid and uncharacteristic mistake of giving Harry Potter the pleasure of doing whatever he wanted and take advantage of her? Not that they did anything more than kiss, but she was still furious with herself.

She couldn't believe herself; she actually jumped on him and kissed him back! Merlin knows why she did that. She was so angry and confused; how could she have let her guard down? And everything went fine until she heard what he told Snape. How could he? He was the one who initiated the kiss!

Ginny was brought back to reality from her thoughts when she heard someone calling her name. "Ginny, are you all right?" Hermione asked.

Ginny looked up and saw her and Ron standing in front of her, looking concerned. It was then that she realized that she had tears in her eyes again. She slowly shook her head and sniffed.

"What happened?" Ron asked.

When Ginny didn't reply, Hermione asked, "Did something happen in detention? Did Snape say something that offended you?"

"It wasn't Snape," Ginny said in a whisper.

"Then who?" Ron asked.

Ginny just shook her head again. "Never mind, Ron, I'm okay now," she said and tried to sound calm.

"Bollocks Ginny! People don't cry for anything!" he argued. "Come on, tell me."

"Just let it go already!" Ginny snapped.

"I won't until you tell me who made you cry!" Ron demanded.

"Ron, maybe you should let me talk to her?" Hermione whispered to her boyfriend, but Ginny heard her anyway and said that she didn't want to talk about it at all.

"I'll owl Mum if you won't tell me who did this to you," Ron threatened. "And I'll tell Dumbledore and McGonagall if you leave me no choice."

Ron turned to leave, but the words he said seemed to affect Ginny. She stood up and held his arm to stop him from making another step before he took off. "NO!" she yelled in shock. "I'll tell you, but you have to swear to me you won't tell anyone, you too, Hermione," she added. "I'm so humiliated and I don't need the whole school to know what happened and give me a hard time."

Ron and Hermione nodded and the three of them moved to the couch in front of the fireplace. Once Ginny felt comfortable, she let out a sigh and started to tell them everything that happened in detention with Harry.

"He did what?" Ron cut Ginny off in mid-sentence when she told them about the kiss. "I'm going to kill that little bastard!"

"Ron, shut up!" Ginny hissed. The last thing she wanted was that the group of fourth years that sat behind them to hear everything. Ron made a move to get up from the couch, but both Ginny and Hermione forced him down. Ginny went on and told them everything else, trying not to miss out on any details.

"You kissed him back?" Ron said in a low voice through gritted teeth, obviously furious with what he was hearing. "He forced you, didn't

he?" he asked, hoping to hear that his sister didn't kiss Harry Potter by her free will.

"He didn't force me, Ron," Ginny said. She lowered her head so she wouldn't have to look at his face and see his reaction, but Ron just gaped at her.

"Wait a minute," Hermione began, interrupting the silence. "If you kissed him back, then why were you crying?"

Ginny started to explain what happened the minute Snape caught them kiss. "Snape told me to leave, so I did, but I stayed behind his office's door and I heard Harry tell him that I put a spell on him!"

"What?" Now it was Hermione's turn to shout. Ron got up quickly and succeeded in avoiding Ginny's grasp on his arm again and ran out of the common room, leaving Hermione and Ginny alone in there.

He started to run towards the Great Hall, when he spotted Draco, Blaise and Harry exiting it and heading to the dungeons. "Potter!" Ron roared, causing all the people present in the room to look at them. Harry looked up and as he saw him, he felt a lump build in his throat. Draco and Blaise looked at Harry and saw him freeze at the sight of Ron approaching them. They didn't know exactly what was going on, and they didn't know how to react, but with any step Ron made toward them, they made one backwards.

"You!" Ron shouted when he was two feet away from Harry. Without any hesitation, he took a swing with his fist and aimed it to Harry's face, knocking him down. "If you ever come near my sister again, I swear I will kill you! You and your bloody friends stay away from her!" he shouted at Harry's limp form on the floor and walked back up to Gryffindor Tower to tell his sister that everything was okay now.

"What's up with you Weasleys being so damn violent?" Harry called out at Ron, kneeling on the floor, nursing a bleeding lip. He looked around and saw students whispering and shooting glances at him. "Oh sure, now there's no teacher to save the day and see what really happened," he said to himself.

Draco and Blaise hurried back to help him get up. When Harry was on his feet again, he wiped the blood off his bottom lip, gently touching the cut.

"Aren't you going to do something to him?" Blaise asked him.

"No, he's not worth it."

"What was he talking about? What did you do to his sister?" Draco asked. He exchanged a confused look with Blaise. They were now heading to the dungeons, like they were going to before the encounter with Ron.

"Nothing," Harry lied. "I have no idea what he was on about. He's probably thinking I attacked her with a spell or something after what she did to me yesterday, which I did not."

"Let's send Crabbe and Goyle to punish him," Blaise suggested with an evil smirk.

"Nah, things can only get worse. I don't want to get into more trouble than I am now. This morning I received a very angry letter from my parents about the detention I got because of that Weaslette. I don't want to receive a howler tomorrow in addition to that."

He had to say that, even if it was true. He just didn't tell them the whole truth. How could he explain to them what happened earlier with the red-head girl? They wouldn't understand. They'd probably make fun of him or something.

He knew he probably deserved the punch from Ron and the knee in the balls from Ginny because what he had said to Snape. He shouldn't have said that, but the words slipped out of his mouth.

He shifted his eyes down and saw his lip starting to get blue and swell. It hurt, but the pain was sufferable.

Tomorrow morning, he decided, he would walk up to her and apologize, but now, all he needed was ice to make the pain go away so he could get some sleep.

"Oh, Harry-poo! I heard what happened last night, are you all right?" Pansy started again to annoy him at breakfast.

"Take a hike, Pansy," Harry said, throwing his toast back to his plate in the lost of his appetite.

"Don't you worry, Harrikins, I'll make the pain go away," said Pansy, who pushed herself between Harry and Draco and sat on Harry's lap, throwing her arm around his neck and hugging him tight. She broke the hug quickly and leaned in to kiss Harry.

"Sod off!" Harry said, pushing Pansy away from him in disgust as he got up from his seat. "I think I'm going to puke," he said to himself.

Harry looked over at Blaise, but he didn't seem to mind that Pansy was all over him again. Blaise sat two seats away from Harry, shot him an amused look and continued to do his homework before the first class.

"All right!" Pansy cried out. "You know what? Fine!" and she walked off, though nobody really seemed to care about her dramatic exit.

Harry let out a long sigh and sat back in his seat, looking at his neglected toast. He had a strange feeling that someone was watching him. He felt someone's eyes on him and when he looked around the Slytherin table, he couldn't see anyone giving him any looks, so he looked around the hall. Finally he spotted that person who was staring at him. Sitting at the Gryffindor table, was none other than Ginny Weasley. When she saw he was looking back at her, she immediately looked away. Harry sighed again. It's going to be a long day...

Around five o'clock at the afternoon, Harry went into the library. After searching the hallways all day for Ginny, he saw her walking with some friends into the library and decided to follow her.

He crept behind bookshelves, pretending to be looking for a book. If someone saw him, he/she'd know what he was really doing, because Harry never visited the library.

He pushed aside two large books so he could get a clear view of Ginny. She sat at a table with her friends and started to work on an essay. Harry wished he could talk to her alone, but he couldn't just show up and ask her if they could talk in front of her friends, surely not to apologize to her in front of them. So he waited, and it didn't take long for her friends to say goodbye to her and leave, like he thought.

Ginny was all alone now. It was the perfect time to talk to her. Harry looked around to see if anybody was watching him and when the coast was clear, he walked slowly to her table. He sat two seats to her right and looked completely innocent. They didn't say anything to each other and she didn't even ask him to leave the table, nor did she get up to leave, but only cast him a strange look, shook her head slowly in disbelief and returned to her essay. "New here?" she finally asked, a small sarcastic grin on her face.

Harry tried to smile back, but found it painful and almost impossible to do with his new fat lip. "Ouch..." he mumbled, wincing from the pain. Ginny looked up again and saw him holding his sore lip with closed eyes. "Very funny," he muttered when the pain passed.

"Well, I've never seen you here before. What are you doing here, anyway?" She went back to her essay again.

"As odd as it may sound, I'm here to apologize for my behavior yesterday," he said.

"Good," Ginny replied. "But if you expect to hear an apology from me, you better leave, because I'm not regretful for what I've done."

"Actually, I know I deserved it. I'm sorry for what I said," he said sheepishly and looked at the table.

"You're not used to apologizing a lot, are you?" she asked curiously.

Harry let out a small laugh. "No. Especially not to girls."

Ginny also chuckled and focused back at her parchment. "We don't bite, you know."

"Oh, some of you do."

"What?"

"Never mind," he replied, shrugging it off. He didn't really know what to say to her now.

He saw a small lock of her red hair fall from her loosened ponytail and she swept it behind her ear, though Harry thought she looked cute the way it was before. She stopped writing and started absently to sway her quill with her thumb and index finger as she searched for ideas to put in her essay.

"Need help?" Harry asked when he saw her do so. Ginny let out another chuckle, but a different one this time, a mocking one. "I'm serious. What is it, Transfiguration?" he asked as he craned his neck to see what the book in front of her was about.

"Yes," she said. "But no thank you."

"I got an E in the Transfiguration O.W.L.," he said. "I can really help you there."

"I don't want to get an E, I want an O," Ginny said and went back to think. After a few seconds she spat, "You're distracting me. I can't concentrate when you're here."

"What exactly about me is distracting you?" he asked with a mischievous tone in his voice.

"What do you want?" Ginny asked loudly, causing some of the students around to shush her, so now she whispered, "You apologized, right? So please leave me alone if you don't want a black eye from me or from my brother."

"I just wanted to know if –"

"Ginny," someone said, causing both Harry and Ginny to look up. Harry saw a young black guy, wearing Gryffindor uniforms standing in

front of their table, looking angrily at him. Dean Thomas, Harry thought. What's he doing with Ginny? "What's going on? Is he bothering you?" Dean asked her.

"No, Dean, he's not," Ginny answered sweetly. She started to gather her books and things and got up. Harry noticed a little dark book falling from the pile of books she was holding. Harry leaned to the floor and picked it up, but Ginny didn't even notice that something was missing. "Here, hold those for me, please," she said and stuffed the books into Dean's hands. "Thank you," she said to him softly. Dean leaned over and kissed her on the lips. Harry saw that Ginny didn't seem to mind his kiss. He felt a little twinge of jealousy when he saw her kissing him back. They didn't even care that Harry was watching them with a frown on his face.

"Oh, you know, there's a Hogsmeade weekend before Halloween, I was thinking we can go together," he said after he pulled back from their kiss.

Ginny's cheeks went red as same as the color of her hair. "Er, can we talk about it someplace else?" she asked in embarrassment, eyeing Harry.

"Right," Dean said. Ginny walked away and didn't see the nasty look Dean shot Harry before walking after her.

Harry watched them leave together. Ginny was holding Dean's hand and leaning her head on his shoulder. What did she see in Dean Thomas, anyway? How could he be better than me? Harry thought. He was fuming. Well, he could smell something burning. In fact, something was burning. Harry looked down and saw the hem of his robes was on fire. He didn't realize that when he saw Dean kiss Ginny, his wand shot sparks and they kindled his robe. Harry apathetically repaired his robes with the help of his wand and got up. He became aware that he was still holding the little black book he picked up from the floor and forgot to give it back to Ginny.

Harry examined the thin book closely. It had a black leather cover with the initials G.M.W. engraved on it in silver. A diary, Harry realized. He was curious to know what was written inside, but he

couldn't do that. His conscience was holding him back from opening the book and starting to read.

Harry stuffed the diary into his robe and decided to keep it until he met Ginny again, so he could give it back to her. He wouldn't read it because he knew that was the wrong thing to do.

At night, Harry found himself lying in his bed wide awake. He couldn't sleep knowing the diary that belonged to the girl he had a crush on lay on his bedside cabinet.

Harry looked at the diary. What can happen if he'll read only one line? A paragraph? An entry? Nothing, right? And Ginny would never know anyway. Screw my conscience, I'm reading it!

A/N: Did I end it with a cliffy? Hee hee... Yes, I did! LOL I love beating up Harry (I'm evil, I know, but it's fun!) and I know I made Ginny such a crying baby in this story, but she won't cry anymore... hint hint :D

Sorry I didn't update for the past month, but I had difficulties to think of a plot, and I blame my laziness for it as well, and my Beta just sent the fixed chapter back.

Anyway, you have to REVIEW! If you won't review, no chapter 7 for you, and I can tell you that it's ready because this chapter was suppose to be like 10 pages longer, but I split it into two parts. So it's up to you, review and chapter 7 will be posted soon ;)

Chapter 7 – Dear Diary:

Harry took the diary in his hands, lightened his wand and opened the diary. Please let it be charmed, he pleaded in his head, this would be the only way he could stop himself from reading the diary, though he knew he was doing something wrong, which he would probably regret about later. He looked down and started to browse through the pages of the diary. Unfortunately, it was an ordinary diary.

He read the first entry:

'August 31st, 1992.

Dear diary,

My brother Charlie bought me this diary for my birthday two weeks ago, so this is my first entry.

Tomorrow will be my first day at Hogwarts! I can't wait! I am finally going to see Ron, Fred, George and Percy! Of course we'll spend the holidays together here at The Burrow, but being here with only mum drives me crazy!

I can't wait to learn how to do magic! Mum bought me all the books, robes and a wand of my own, though we needed to save money, so we bought everything second-hand, except for my wand (because the wand chooses the owner).

Even though all of those things are so exciting, I can't wait for tomorrow for a whole different reason – him. The love of my life, the one I saw last year on platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, talking to Ron, Fred and George...'

Everything Harry had read so far was boring. It was just an 11-years-old's girly trash. He was about to close the diary and try to get some sleep when something written on the page caught his eye – his own name.

'...talking to Ron, Fred and George – Harry Potter!' he read.

Harry gulped hard. His name was encircled with little red hearts. Ginny had had a crush on him! Merlin, he didn't know it. He always

thought she hated his guts. He could perfectly remember his first day on platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$...

Flashback:

"All you need to do in order to get up onto the platform is to go straight into the barrier between platforms nine and ten until you will be on the platform. Got it?" James asked Harry, bending down to his eye level, and gesturing with his hand to the barrier he had just talked about.

Harry nodded slowly, but still looked confused. What if he crashed into it?

"Oh, here, watch them," Lily said and pointed towards a family of red-heads going through the barrier and disappearing once they went through it.

Harry nodded to his father with understanding and James rose back up.

"All right, now you try and we'll be right behind you," she said. James nodded to them that the coast was clear from Muggles and Harry pushed his cart and ran towards the stone barrier.

The view changed and he could see he was on a new platform. An old steam powered, scarlet train stood next to it. The platform was packed with people; kids were walking with their parents, all of them carrying with trolleys like his.

"You still have fifteen minutes, Harry," James said, after crossing the barrier with Lily.

"Look, James, here's Remus," Lily said and led them to Remus Lupin, who was talking to the two older red-heads Harry saw earlier.

"Come on, Harry. You know Remus is going to be your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, right? He's starting today, just like you," James said with a smile.

Harry's parents stopped next to Remus, Harry followed, but looked around the place and enjoyed the scene. "James, Lily, hey!" Remus greeted when he saw his friends. "Hey Harry, feeling nervous?" He caught Harry's attention, and messed his untidy raven black hair, and causing his little square shape glasses to become askew on the bridge of his nose.

"A little," Harry said, fixing his glasses. "Are you?"

"A bit, but then of course I remember that I already attended Hogwarts and that I'm only going back as a teacher," he told him. Then he turned back to James and Lily. "Oh, silly me, I forgot to introduce you to the Weasleys. Molly, Arthur, I would like you to meet my best friends, James and Lily Potter and their son Harry. Harry is a first year starting today."

"Hello, nice to meet you," the plump, red-headed lady called Molly Weasley shook James' and Lily's hands. The old, thin, slightly balding man, who wore glasses, looked at Lily in awe.

"Are you really?" he asked. "Merlin, you and Sirius Black defeated the Dark Lord! It's a pleasure to meet you!" he shook Lily's hand aggressively and then James', and finally gave Harry a wide smile. "You have a sister who is a Muggle, right?" he asked Lily, sounding very interested.

"Arthur!" Molly snapped at her husband, smacking the back of his bald head and causing his small glasses to fall to the end of his nose. "You have to excuse my husband. He's head of the 'Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office' in the ministry, and when it comes to Muggles, he's totally obsessed. He doesn't understand that they're just normal human beings like us, except for the fact they can't do magic! You hear me Arthur?"

"Yes, dear," he said quietly and added a polite "Sorry" to Lily.

Lily chuckled in amusement. "Actually it's okay. Yes, my sister and her husband are Muggles, but we're not in touch with them. They don't like the fact that I'm a witch," said Lily.

"Oh, sorry to hear about it," Molly said apologetically.

"Molly and Arthur and their two elder sons are actually joining the Order," Remus interrupted.

"Oh really?" James asked with interest.

"Yes, we talked to Dumbledore and everything is settled," Molly said. "We really want to contribute what we can and help catch the free Death Eaters out there."

"Mother, I need to be in the Prefect compartment. Where's my sandwich?" Harry saw a red-head boy, the oldest of the family there, now standing next to Molly. He also wore glasses and he was already in his Hogwarts uniforms. Harry noticed a shiny scarlet and gold badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

Molly excused herself from the conversation. James, Lily, Remus and Arthur continued to talk about their own business, none of which interested Harry, so he continued to look around him. Ten minutes to eleven, he noticed the hour of the clock on the platform's wall. Harry was bored, so he watched Molly Weasley talking to her son, to escape the imposing boredom.

"Here you go, Percy, corned beef, exactly as you like it," Molly said as she pulled out a wrapped sandwich from the bag she was holding in her hand. "Now, where are you brothers?"

"Right here!" two identical red-head twin brothers chorused together behind her. Next to them stood a young, long-nosed boy, and a small freckled girl, both with red hair. The boy looked around Harry's age, but taller than him, and the girl a bit younger than both of them.

"All right, what have you two been up to now?" Molly asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," the twins said together innocently.

"When the two of you say 'nothing' together, it's a sign for trouble!" Percy said.

"Oh, ickle Perciekins is a Prefect!" one of the twins teased.

"How does it feel to be a Prefect, Perfect Percy?" the other twin joked and pinched his brother's cheek with his fingers. Harry tried not to smile, but couldn't help it. His grin gave him away when Mrs. Weasley looked at him.

"Oh, Ron, this is Harry Potter," she suddenly said. "He is a first year, too."

Lily looked around to them when she heard that. "Oh, this is great. Maybe they could be friends? All of Harry's friends unfortunately are Muggles," she explained to Mrs. Weasley. "It would be nice if he was to have a wizard friend. What house were you?"

"All of us were in Gryffindor. We hope Ron and Ginny will, too. She'll attend next year. Where is she, by the way?" Molly looked around and then spotted her daughter. "Oh, Ginny, come here, sweetie, don't get too far." Harry saw she was shooting him weird looks, before walking to her mother.

"This is great, then. We were also Gryffindors. I bet Harry and Ron will be good friends," Lily said excitedly.

Harry and Ron started to talk and then the twins butted in and introduced themselves as Fred and George.

The train started to whistle and everyone hurried their children to get onto it. Harry heard Remus promise his parents he would keep an eye on him.

Harry said goodbye to his parents, they wished him a good year and promised that they'd see him at Christmas and reminded him to write a lot.

Harry got up on the train and went to find a compartment with Ron. He heard the little girl crying behind, along with the yells of Mrs. Weasley at Fred and George that she didn't want to receive letters telling her they got detentions again. They whined and said it's

impossible for them not to get into trouble. The twins calmed their sister by telling her that she would be seeing them soon (though Harry had a strange feeling that she wasn't just crying about their departure) and they got on the train...

End of Flashback.

Was she crying because he was leaving? Very unlikely, but who knows? He didn't even know she had a crush on him.

Harry kept reading the entry, but there was nothing special about this entry beside what he had just read. He looked for his name in the rest of the diary entries, curious to know more, to see what else she wrote about him.

He found in the second entry something quite interesting:

'September 10th, 1992.

Dear diary,

How can this be? Why did I deserve it? He's a Slytherin! Now I know why Ron never said a word about him when he came back from Hogwarts. An evil wizard, that's what he will become one day. I can't fall for a Slytherin. What was I thinking?

Ginny.'

Harry continued to look for others clues about him. He found one and read it. She wrote this entry at February 14th, 1993, still at her first year. She wrote how he stared at her that day, but she didn't know why. She thought it was because it was Valentine's Day, or because he knew it was she who sent him the Valentine poem that morning. Harry remembered that poem. He wasn't embarrassed by it and laughed at it, but he didn't know who wrote it back then, he just thought it was pathetic and awfully written. He read the rest of the entry and noticed the words 'But I still loved him.' She also wrote that her brothers told her to forget him, but as right as they were, it was difficult for her to do so.

He flipped the pages and stopped at the date December 19th, 1994. Harry could sense that her writing had improved with time. She began to write more seriously and to the point, not to babble about things nonstop. At the same entry, Harry read how Neville Longbottom asked her out to the Yule Ball. She accepted because it was her only chance for going, since third years weren't allowed to go. She wrote that it was her first date, but she wasn't excited about it at all, because she didn't fancy Neville, because Neville was not him.

He moved on to January 27th, 1995. She wrote about how she had fun at the ball, and she even met a guy, Michael Corner. He asked her out and she said she would think about it. Harry was puzzled. She didn't even mention him once in that entry. He turned over the page and read the next entry. She told about the great date she had with Michael at Hogsmeade, but she's thinking of breaking up with him. Is that why Dean Thomas going with her now? Harry thought, but again, found his eyes returning back to the page when he noticed the post script in the entry he just read. It said: 'P.S. Needless to say that I'm over stupid Harry Potter.'

Excuse me? Harry thought, shocked and annoyed at the same time. STUPID? How dare she call me stupid?

Harry moved to the end of the diary and read the last entry. He was surprised it was written in red ink and not with her usual neat handwriting:

'September 15th, 1996.' Harry realized Ginny wrote it only yesterday.

'I hate him! I hate him! HATE HIM! I HATE BLOODY HARRY POTTER!'

"What?" Harry blurted in shock, but as he realized he said it out loud, he looked around his room to see he didn't wake his friends up.

'How could he? Who the hell does he think he is? He bloody kissed me! Why would I expect receiving a kiss from the idiotic Slytherin toad?'

"Toad? She got too far," Harry mumbled angrily.

'Bloody kiss and bloody Harry Potter. Did I say that I hate him? He thinks he can get what he wants if he'll say to me that I'm beautiful and amazing, but oh, how he's wrong!

I never even wanted to kiss him back in the first place, but old feelings gathered up and I couldn't control myself. I don't love him and I regret that I ever had a crush on him. I hate him and I hate myself for kissing him.

The thing that I hate the most right now is that he told Snape I put a spell on him! He wishes! I mean, how could he? One second he kisses me, and the other he throws that in my face?

Good for me to knee him, and good for Ron to punch him, because he deserves what he got!

Only problem now is Dean. I don't want him to know what happened. He's too sweet to lose. He's a much better boyfriend than Michael and things going really well.

I hope Ron or Hermione won't tell him, I really like him.

Ginny.'

Harry closed the diary. There weren't anymore entries to read, and even if there were, he wouldn't read them. How could he think she was great? Maybe she used to fancy him, but now she really hated him, and she had a boyfriend.

Things were so complicated now. He didn't notice her when she liked him, and when he finally sees her, she's not that girl anymore. Now, he liked her, but she's clearly confused. She writes about how much she hates him, but she still has feelings for him. So what does she really feel? And what does he feel for her after reading her personal thoughts?

He decided to let it go. She's not worth the trouble. There are plenty of girls out there that would actually throw themselves at him. Tomorrow he would give her back the diary and walk away.

But no matter what she says and why she's trying to convince herself she hates him, Harry knew she didn't. She still kissed him back.

His mind went to think about Dean Thomas. He hadn't known she had a boyfriend. And she said she doesn't want to lose him because

they really good together. So he decided, an eye for an eye, Weasley, he thought. You make me jealous, I'll make you jealous.

Harry woke up the next morning hearing howls of laughter around his dormitory. He stretched out his hands, put his glasses on and got up from bed to see Draco and Blaise reading Ginny's diary and laughing occasionally. "God, Harry, where did you find this diary?" Draco sniggered when he saw him getting up from bed.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in shock. It took him a few seconds to realize that Ginny wrote about him in her diary and those were personal things that he didn't want his friends to know.

"Read him this one," Blaise said to Draco, pointing his fingers in the page.

"Right. Harry, listen, you'll be very interested to hear this," Draco cleared his throat and started to read from the diary, mimicking a little girl's voice: "'Even though all of those things,' Blah, blah, blah, 'I can't wait for tomorrow for a whole different reason – him. The love of my life, the one I saw last year on platform 9 ¾, talking to Ron, Fred and George – Harry Potter.' Merlin, Harry, this girl had a crush on – hey, what are you doing, give it back!" Draco yelled at Harry, who snatched the diary from Draco's hands, and didn't look very pleased about what his friends did. Harry didn't follow his friend's order, so Draco pulled out his wand and called "Accio Diary!" The diary flew from Harry's grasp back to Draco's hand. Draco looked at the cover of the diary. "Who's G.M.W., Harry?"

"I think I read the name Ginny at the end of the entry," Blaise said. He made a thinking face and said, "Ginny? The only Ginny I can think of is Ginny Weasley, the one who knocked him down couple of days ago."

"Draco, give it back," Harry said calmly.

"Not before I read another juicy detail," he smirked and opened the diary again. Blaise leaned behind his shoulder and peeked in.

"Give it back," Harry said firmly. "Draco, I'm serious, give it back."

"No, I don't want to. What do you have to hide, anyway?" he said as he thumbed through the pages. Harry saw he stopped at the last entry written in the red ink and Draco and Blaise started to read it. Harry didn't have the energy to chase after Draco just so he can have the diary back, not he hadn't have the strength to pull out his wand and Accio it back, because he knew he always has been weak perform magic in the morning. He sat on the edge of his bed and waited until they'd finished reading. He looked blankly at the floor and heard Draco chuckle for a second, but then Blaise gasped and Harry closed his eyes. "WHAT?" Draco shouted suddenly. Harry thought he might do that, that's why his yell didn't cause him to jump like it did to Blaise. "You kissed her? The Weaslette?"

Harry got up from his bed, walked toward his friends again and held out his hand. "Yes. Now can I have the diary back? I need to return it to her."

"Tough luck she hates you, mate," Blaise said. "But why her? Why a Gryffindor?" he said the last word with a disgusted look.

"I thought you hated her," Draco said curiously, closing the diary and giving it back to Harry. "Why didn't you say that's why Weasel punched you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry said sheepishly.

"Oh, come on! We're your friends, we're not going to make fun of you," Blaise said.

"I don't like her, okay?" Harry lied. He tried to sound calm, but he couldn't get rid of the annoyance in his voice. "This is my way to punish her for what she did to me the other day, got it?"

Draco and Blaise nodded. "So you mean you fooled her?" Draco asked slowly. Harry just nodded.

Harry got dressed quickly and went to find Ginny in the Great Hall. Luckily, he found her sitting alone at the Gryffindor table, reading a letter a small Tawny owl just dropped her. Harry walked up to her, and when he reached her, he put the diary in front of her on the table.

Ginny quickly turned around and saw him. He could tell she was confused. "I – I found this after you left the library yesterday. I guess those are the initials of your name," he said quietly.

"D...did you r...read it?" She stuttered. He knew she was afraid that he read what she wrote inside.

"No," Harry lied. From the corner of his eye he spotted Dean Thomas approaching them. There was nothing left for him to say, so he turned around and walked to the Slytherin table.

He found himself staring at her smooth red hair during breakfast because she had her back turned to him. He saw Dean holding her hand and making her laugh when he told a joke. Harry shook his head vigorously.

"Harry, are you okay?" he heard someone asking, but he didn't register who it was. Harry looked around the table until he saw Pansy sitting quietly with Millicent Bulstrode. He got up from his seat, and walked quickly to Pansy. Harry sighed before he nudged her shoulder with his finger. She swung around and faced him. He took a deep breath, then cupped her face in his hands and leaned in to kiss her in a passionate way. Pansy squeaked at first from the shock, but relaxed into the kiss and threw her arms around his neck, pushing his body closer to hers and deepening the kiss. Harry could hear in the background many whistles and 'ooohs' from the other Slytherins. Something suddenly came to his mind. He was kissing Pansy Parkinson! Harry broke the kiss and let go of Pansy. He tried to look like he enjoyed it.

"Wow," Pansy mumbled. Harry saw her face was deep red and she looked a little perplexed.

He smiled at her and walked out of the Great Hall. As he walked, he saw in the corner of his eyes Ginny looking at him. She was pale with shock. Harry smirked inwardly at her sight and left the hall.

He was late to Potions on purpose that day. He walked into the classroom, his shirt was untucked, and his tie was loose. He carried his robe over his shoulder and walked inside like nothing was wrong.

Fortunately, Snape wasn't around, so he walked slowly and took his time, drawing everyone's attention to himself, but then Snape entered from his office and Harry ducked behind someone's chair before he saw him. When Snape turned his back to the class, Harry sneaked to Pansy's desk and quickly managed to escape the Potions Master's eyes. He motioned Crabbe to move to another table and Harry took his seat next to Pansy.

Pansy looked excited and nervous at the same time. Harry made sure that Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley and Dean Thomas saw him before he turned her around and kissed her with another deep kiss, which again, caused all the Slytherins to clap their hands and whistle, and the Gryffindors to look at them in shock and disgust.

"Silence everyone!" Snape called. "And Mr. Potter, thank you for finally joining us, I will see you in detention tonight, in my office at seven o'clock for being fifteen minutes late."

All the Gryffindors 'ooohed' with amusement, but Harry didn't care. Detention would take his mind off the little red-head that insisted to be stuck in his mind.

After class, Draco and Blaise walked with Harry back to the common room. "What's up with you today?" Draco asked.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"First you kissed Parkinson at breakfast and now in class?" he sounded as shocked as the Gryffindors were earlier.

"I may have changed my mind about her," Harry replied. "Hey, Blaise, you don't mind, right?"

Harry didn't see Blaise sulk since Blaise walked ahead of him and Draco, but he sensed something was wrong when he didn't answer him. "Blaise?" he asked again, worried about his sudden silence.

Blaise stopped walking and almost caused Draco and Harry to crash into his back. Blaise turned around and faced Harry. "You said you

can't stand her and you told me to take her off your back," Blaise said, sounding offended.

"I thought you were over her," Harry explained.

"Well, I'm not over her. I didn't talk about her because I knew you were tired of it, so I stopped, but I didn't stop feeling the way I did."

"I'm sorry," Harry said apologetically. "I didn't know."

Draco rolled his eyes in boredom. "I'm going to do my homework," he said and left for the common room.

"Look, Blaise, I'll let her go if you want her that much," Harry said. He didn't want to hurt his best friend just because he wanted a certain Gryffindor girl to notice him, by using the object of Blaise's affection.

Blaise's face lit up a little. "Really?"

"Yeah. I might say something about you to her, if you'd like."

Blaise now grinned stupidly and nodded. "Thanks."

Rumors had been spread all over school by dinner time. The hot topic was that Harry and Pansy been an item, of course, but seeing Blaise suffered from the talking, Harry made his way toward Pansy again.

When she saw him approach her, she made him some room to sit next to her, but he didn't take it. He looked seriously in her eyes before he said, "Look, Pansy, I don't think it will work out."

"What?" she sounded confused.

"Me and you, I mean," he said, watching her eyes go glassy with tears. Oh, how he hated when they cry. Girls, go figure. "I'm sorry, it's not you, Pansy —"

"Please don't give me the 'it's not you, it's me' cliché," she cut him off.

"I wasn't gonna," Harry answered. Why would she think it was about him? God knows why. "I was going to say it's Blaise."

"Who?" Pansy truly sounded like she didn't know who Blaise is.

"Blaise Zabini, my friend, you know him," Harry turned around and pointed her towards Blaise's direction, who was stuffing a steak-and-kidney pie into his mouth at that moment.

Pansy looked lost by now. "Why is it about him?"

"Because he really fancies you, and I care for you both and I think you two could really hit it off," he added with an assuring smile.

Pansy made an offended sound and got up from her seat. She shot her nose up snobbishly and called loudly, so everyone in the Hall could hear her, "Merlin knows what I found so fascinating in you, Harry Potter. You are nothing but an arrogant, childish and selfish boy, who thinks he has it all, and not to mention what a lousy kisser you are!" she snapped and walked out of the hall with her Slytherin girlfriends hot on her heels.

Harry couldn't have been happier. He finally got rid of Pansy and now he could couple her with Blaise, though it would take some time for her to cool down. And Ginny saw it all, right?

At that moment, Harry turned to take a glimpse at the Gryffindor table, but the only red-head he could spot was the irritating brother of hers. No way all this scene was for nothing!

"Eww! Eww! Eww!" Draco walked with quick steps into the common room in his bathrobe, slippers and towel.

"What?" Blaise asked him. Harry was too busy writing an essay about Vampires to see how ridiculous Draco looked at the moment.

"I just bumped into Weasley in the Prefects' bathroom," Draco said, looking horrified. That was all it took to get Harry's attention.

"Which Weasley?" he asked carefully trying not to send any hint of interest.

"The male one, the sight of him with a towel around his pale, skinny body was absolutely gross!" Draco exclaimed and his all body shuddered. "Believe me, seeing his sister with a towel would be a much more pleasant sight for my eyes."

"Oh," Harry said and tried to get back to his essay without making any remark of jealousy.

"Oooh," Blaise said suddenly with amusement in his voice. No, he didn't catch that, Harry's mind pleaded. "Harry still fancies her," he added in a singing voice.

"I do not!" Harry protested.

"Than why are you blushing scarlet?"

"Be...beca...because you're making me nervous with all of your stupid and false statements!"

"Okay, but you did fancy her before didn't you?"

"No!"

"Oh, shut up you two!" Draco interrupted. Blaise went quiet and Harry went back to his essay. "I'm going to my bed," he said and went for the boys' dormitories.

Blaise looked around to see if Draco was gone; he slowly leaned his body towards Harry and whispered, "I know you fancy her."

Harry had enough. He reached for a pillow that lay on the couch and threw it at Blaise. Blaise got up without saying another word to him. He only gave him a smirk and received a threatening look from Harry, and with that, he left him alone.

A/N: Sorry if the dates in the diary don't make sense, it confused me too. Chapter 8 will contain a Quidditch game, yay! (Though I honestly don't know when I'll post it, because I haven't written it yet, and I have a lot of school projects on my mind right now, so please be patient).

Please REVIEW if you liked this chapter, and I'll try my best to update soon ;)

Chapter 8 – Quidditch Fever:

It was one Friday evening at end of October when Harry gathered his teammates for the last Quidditch practice before the game against Gryffindor the follow morning.

The team has never been better than this year, and Harry was satisfied and proud to be their Captain.

While he caught the Snitch over and over again, Draco blocked the Quaffle that Blaise and the other two Chasers, Leroy Graham and Ben Jackson tried to throw through the goal posts, and Crabbe and Goyle did an excellent job of blocking Leroy and Ben's attempts by hitting Bludgers at them. Such a fine job, they almost knocked the Chasers off their brooms.

When he called them in for a final talk before practice ended, he opened with a speech, saying that he didn't want them to disappoint him, and told them that there was no reason for them losing the game to the Gryffindors. He dismissed them and walked back to the castle along with Blaise and Draco.

"I think you should promise us the same thing," Blaise said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, confused.

"Well, see," Blaise started. "The Gryffindor Seeker is none other then your current crush, Ms. Weasley. If we lose the game to them, it will be only because you let her catch the Snitch because she fluttered her eyelashes at you, or something like that."

"Oh, not this again!" Harry growled.

"Yeah, I'm getting tired of this, too," Draco said with a yawn.

They just walked up the few stone steps to the castle. Dinner was about to start in the Great Hall, and the sound of hundreds of students could be heard.

"Yeah, listen Blaise," Harry began. "Let's say that hypothetically I do have a crush on her, don't you think I can separate personal feelings and professional business? I won't let her get the Snitch, and I don't care how great a Seeker she is. I have never missed the Snitch and I'm not going to miss it tomorrow. Clear?"

"As a crystal," Blaise responded with a weird smirk on his face. Harry didn't know what he was smirking about until they walked into the entrance hall and saw the same girl they had just talked about, standing near the doors of the Great Hall with her boyfriend.

Harry's eyes locked on her, and suddenly everything seemed to go in a slow motion.

"So, on Sunday, because you have that game tomorrow," Harry heard Dean saying to her.

"I don't know Dean, I really should study. I have loads of homework and it's O.W.L.S. year. I want to have good grades," Ginny replied as an excuse. Her arms were wrapped around couple of books she was holding tight to her chest. She looked a bit uncomfortable around Dean for some strange reason.

"Come on, Ginny! We haven't been on a normal date for a long time now, and I'd really like to take you out. It's Halloween's Hogsmeade weekend, are you really going to study on a holiday?"

"Yes, Dean, I am, and I'm sorry." They had just passed the arguing couple, and Harry saw her shoot him a quick glance before she shifted her eyes back to Dean. She quickly added, "Another time, okay?" And she walked into the Great Hall quickly, leaving Dean alone.

Harry suddenly woke up from his daze when he heard Blaise chuckle and say something to Draco. "Hmm... did you see that?" Blaise said playfully.

"Yeah, I saw that. We're so losing tomorrow's game," Draco replied with the same tone.

Harry could only sigh, now that his friends caught him red-handed, staring at Ginny. He tried to make excuses, but everything he said didn't make any sense, so he finally gave in and admitted that he did fancy her a bit, and he was glad that his friends didn't make a big deal out of his confession.

Harry decided that he wouldn't let his team down. Whatever he felt towards Ginny was to stay behind until the game was over. He would play fairly and treat her like he treated all the other Seekers he played against in the past.

He didn't forget the talk he had with Snape the day before. After the last Potions class ended, Snape had asked him to stay behind again. Harry had wondered what he had done wrong this time, but instead of getting yelled at, he was surprised to hear Snape wishing him good luck at the game. Of course that wasn't all, and before Harry left the classroom, Snape added in a threatening voice that they better win this match.

So now Harry was in the changing room, giving his team a final pep talk before the game began. "All right, guys! Let's show them what we've got!" he said when he finished talking, and everyone proclaimed their competitive spirit together. One by one, they hopped on their brooms, flew out of the changing room and onto the pitch.

The weather was nice and convenient for a game. The skies were light blue with a shade of the end of October's grey in them. A cloud or two hid the warm sun and a cool breeze blew through their hair, raising everyone's spirits.

"And here's the Slytherin team," called Dennis Creevey, the new commentator. "Potter, Malfoy, Graham, Zabini, Jackson, Crabbe and Goyle!"

They could hear loads of cat calls at them from the three other houses, but all of the Slytherin house cheered them and that was what really mattered.

"And from the other side of the pitch comes the Gryffindor team! Weasley, Slopper, Kirke, Bell, Weasley, Gates and Bennett!"

Now it was totally the opposite. The Slytherins booed and the other three houses cheered with all their might.

Everyone made a few warm up laps around the stadium, before they landed on the pitch, in front of Madam Hooch, who was ready with the Quaffle in her hands. Oddly enough, Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall and Remus weren't in the Teachers' stands. Madam Hooch, Hagrid, Flitwick and Sprout were the only adults watching the game.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch ordered.

Reluctantly, Harry walked a few steps forward as did Ron Weasley. Harry knew the tradition. Every time the Captains shook hands, it was to wish the other Captain bad luck at the game.

Harry extended his hand to Ron, who hesitantly shook it, probably aware of the pain Harry wanted to cause him. Harry pressed his fingers on Ron's lean palm and started to squeeze it hard. It seemed to work, because Ron let out a faint whimper and then pulled his hand back quickly, wrapping it with his other hand, to ease the pain. No, I guess Ron wasn't aware of the 'secret handshake', Harry thought. Oh, well, he does now. He added mentally to himself that this was his payback for the fat lip the Weasel gave him.

Madam Hooch, however, didn't seem to notice what happened, or chose not to, because she was used to it by now. "Ready?" she asked after each Captain went back to his place. "I want a fair game, no funny business, you get it? Mount your brooms," she said and released the three balls that were locked in the box, which was sitting on the ground next to her. She then blew hard on her whistle and threw the Quaffle high into the air as all fourteen players rose from the ground.

They had a good start. Blaise got the Quaffle within two seconds and he was already on his way to the goal posts. He spotted a Gryffindor Chasers coming his way, and threw the ball to Ben, who passed it to Leroy. All three of them ducked as a Bludger almost hit them. Blaise got the possession of the Quaffle again and flew the Gryffindor goal posts. Ron Weasley was ready to block the ball, but missed it when

Blaise pretended to aim it to the right loop, but instead shot it to the left one.

"Slytherin scores, ten-zero!" called Dennis Creevey's voice to the megaphone.

Within only five minutes Slytherin scored four more goals, while Gryffindor was stuck with a zero.

Harry wasn't worried about his team and while they played with the Quaffle, he was looking for the Snitch. Too bad it disappeared. Harry saw in the corner of his eye that Ginny was still looking for it as well. Harry did a lap around the pitch, thinking maybe this way he'd have a new perspective and would find it hiding somewhere he didn't bother to look earlier. He looked very carefully at Ginny, to see if she had spotted the Snitch before him.

"Ooh! Gryffindor scores!" Dennis said excitedly. "The score is fifty-ten to Slytherin, but the game can end very differently. Slytherin may be a better team now more than ever, especially since Harry Potter is their new Captain, but Gryffindor's new Seeker, Ginny Weasley, can still save the day and bring them 150 points! And it's Slytherin in possession again –"

Harry blocked Creevey's commentaries from his mind and shot an evil glare at Draco for letting the Gryffindors score. Draco was on the other edge of the stadium protecting the goal loops. He caught Harry's glare, but only shrugged with a sorry look on his face as a response.

The game continued, and again, Blaise had the Quaffle, and he flew to the Gryffindor goal posts. "Hey Zabini," called Katie Bell, who was flying very close to him. "I just saw Pansy Parkinson blowing you a kiss."

Blaise abruptly stopped his broom, and from the force of the halt, almost fell backwards from it. He managed to control it and balanced himself in time, before he slipped. He tossed his head in every possible direction. "What? Where?"

"I don't know," Katie answered and with a swift movement of her hands, she snatched the Quaffle right from his grip and turned around.

It took Blaise a few seconds to realize it was just a diversion, but when he turned around and saw Katie wave her hand at him and calling "thank you." He muttered "bitch!" under his breath, and went back on his pursue after the Quaffle.

The game went on and the Snitch hadn't been found yet. Just then Harry heard a buzzing sound from near by. He looked around carefully, as to not alert Ginny, to see where the Snitch has just been. He found it, now hovering just a few inches above the ground.

Without even thinking, Harry dove toward the little golden ball, hoping it wouldn't disappear again. A quick glance to his left showed him that Ginny did the same thing and now they were on the same level and same distance from the Snitch.

He could hear in the background the crowd's sudden gasp and Creevey's excited commentary.

The fresh green grass came closer and closer by the second and luckily, the Snitch stayed put for a change. He reached out his hand as he drew closer, very aware of the fact that Ginny's body came very close to his. Closer and closer to the ground they flew, and Harry was sure he was going to crash, if not into Ginny, into the ground, but then the Snitch's wings twitched a little, and both Seekers knew what was going to happen next.

Harry felt his feet sweep the grass as he halted his broom for a second and shot up, back into the sky, practically making a ten degree angle with the ground. He picked up speed again as he rose higher into the air. Ginny was just behind him. Determined to catch the ball before him, she forced her broom to reach his level.

Their hands were still stretched out as they chased the little ball. "You must be a really good flier if your Cleansweep can fly as fast as my Firebolt," he yelled to her. The wind blowing on their faces made it almost impossible to hear. Even Dennis Creevey's loud commentary

sounded muffled to them. She didn't respond to that, and was still focused on the ball.

Harry suddenly heard a whistle, but it wasn't Madam Hooch's, this one sounded different, unsteady and louder. It was getting stronger and stronger by the minute. A little black dot came into view ahead of them. The Snitch decided to fly to the left, and both of them changed their direction. The black dot wasn't little anymore, and it was coming in their way. As Harry realized what the dot actually was, panic came over him. That was a Bludger, which was going to hit them any second if they didn't stop chasing the Snitch. No Beater was close enough to change its track.

"Pull away!" Harry yelled at Ginny.

"No!" she yelled back. She wasn't afraid at all, and continued chasing the Snitch. She was braver than him, that's why she was in Gryffindor and he wasn't.

Harry remembered his promise. He wouldn't let her get the Snitch, and if it meant he had to chase it and be hit by a Bludger to get it before her, so be it. He forced himself to be brave as well, and focused himself on the tiny ball, the Bludger now closer than ever.

"Pull away now and I will do so as well!" He gave her another chance, but she didn't pull away, and neither did he. Harry wasn't sure if he would catch it, but he wasn't about to chicken out. His finger tickled the ball slightly, and as the Bludger hit them both in the shoulder, he managed close his grip on the ball.

The next thing he knew, he was lying sprawled on the ground. He felt an enormous pain in his shoulder, like someone ripped out his arm right out. When he turned to check if his arm was indeed in its proper place, he was relieved to see that it was still attached to his body. He was also surprised to see he wasn't only holding the Snitch, but another hand as well. His eyes widened as he followed the hand he held and saw it belonged to the unconscious Ginny Weasley lying by his side. Her ponytail wasn't so neat and tight like she had before, and it was messed because of the fall. She looked so peaceful when she wasn't conscious.

Harry looked up at the sky, unable to move his upper body. His sight was blurry and he realized then that his glasses had fallen askew on the bridge of his nose. He heard another whistle; this one unmistakably belonged to Madam Hooch.

A group of people suddenly gathered around him in a circle, and he could only see their heads looking down at him.

"All right, Potter, let go of my sister's hand!" Ron Weasley said firmly.

"I can't," Harry said. "I can't move my arm."

"Bullshit –"

"Let's see you move a broken arm after a Bludger hit you in the shoulder!" Harry snapped.

Ron ignored him and bent down to Ginny and unsuccessfully tried to wake her up.

"Who won the game, Madam Hooch?" Katie Bell asked. "They both caught the Snitch."

"I'm not sure. This never happened before. I can only think of two possible options: one, to do a rematch, or two, to announce Slytherin as the winners because they had more points."

"I call a rematch!" Ron said immediately, not even considering the matter.

"There's no way we're doing a rematch!" Harry protested, still lying on the ground.

"Why, are you afraid to lose, Potter?" Ron taunted.

"Weasley, if we do a rematch, not only we beat you sorry asses again, but we'll gain more points!"

While they argued, a little voice spoke up. "We're not doing a rematch." Everyone fell silent as Ginny stirred.

"What?" Ron exclaimed with shock.

"We're not doing a rematch because I caught the Snitch!" she said.

Ron helped her sit up and she tried to pull her hand, holding the Snitch, unaware it was clutched tightly inside Harry's palm. When she gasped with pain, Ron seized her by the shoulders and held her still. "Are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

"No, I think I broke my arm." She lay back on her back, taking in her surroundings. She then saw her hand was held with Harry's, who was lying next to her on the ground, looking up.

"Anyway, see, I caught the Snitch." She motioned her hand, ignoring the fact that Harry held the ball too.

"We both caught it," he said quietly, avoiding looking at her face.

"Move aside, coming through!" They could all hear Madam Pomfrey's voice coming from near by. The group of people that gathered around the two Seekers split into two lines, and then they saw Madam Pomfrey emerged from behind. She held her first-aid kit in her hands. She bent down to see what happened, tutting to herself.

"They say they broke their arms," informed her Madam Hooch.

"Yes, I can see that, they turned blue," she replied. "However, I don't have all the potions they need here. We'll take them to the infirmary, but first..."

She suddenly reached out her hands and before Harry could ask what she was doing, he let out a sharp yell, same as Ginny's. Their hands came separated and the Snitch zoomed into the air.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked them, as neither of them got up from the ground.

Draco, who was one of the watchers, helped Harry get up to his feet, and Ron helped Ginny. They all walked out of the pitch, together with the rest of the school, and they were still arguing about who won the game. "Shut up, you lot!" called Madam Hooch. "I'll have a talk with your Heads of Houses and the Headmaster and hopefully we will let you know who won the game by dinner time."

The two teams walked quietly into the hospital wing behind Harry and Ginny, who were still avoiding each other's eyes.

Harry was seated by Madam Pomfrey on the closest bed to the door of the infirmary and Ginny in the bed opposite his.

"I got your broom, Harry," said Blaise. "I'll put it back in our dorms, by your bed."

"Thanks," he replied. He turned to all his teammates and whispered so no one else could hear, "Hey guys, no one agrees for a rematch, got it?" Everyone nodded.

Madam Pomfrey came back from her office with at least eight different potions in her hands, and shooed everyone (who wasn't Ginny or Harry) out, and then forced her two patients to drink all of the potions. Each potion Pomfrey gave Harry, tasted worse than the one before.

"You tend to get hurt a lot, Mr. Potter."

It wasn't Madam Pomfrey who said it, but Ginny.

Truth be told, all the bruises he suffered from lately happened because of this little redhead. Harry wondered if she was worth the trouble fighting for, because all she did was hurt him.

"Tell me, Ms. Weasley," he said after a few moments of thinking, when Madam Pomfrey finally left the room. "Was it worth risking your life for a victory in a game?"

"Of course," she replied simply.

Harry frowned. "Why? Do you hate your life that much?"

"No, I hate you so much I don't mind ending my life so I won't have to see you again," she said sarcastically.

"Why do you hate me?" He sounded hurt.

"Because you're a git and you're stalking me."

"Oh, you're saying it like it's a bad thing!" he joked, but then turned serious. "I'm not stalking you."

"Then how come wherever I go, I see you there?" she inquired.

"I don't call it stalking, I call it coincidence," he said.

"It could have been coincidence for the first or second time, but now it's like I have a tail with its own name, and its name is Harry Potter."

"Fine. I'm still not stalking you."

"Oh, so you just happened to meet me in the library that day, and sit at my table from all the tables around, doing nothing?"

"Er..." he was caught off guard.

"I thought so," she didn't let him respond. The room was filled with silence full of tension. Finally, she spoke again. "So, did you have a good snog with Parkinson?"

Harry smiled to himself, glad the kiss with Pansy finally paid off and made her jealous. "Oh, I had a great snog with her," he said proudly. "Couple of snogs, actually," he admitted.

"Good for you," Ginny said, trying to sound sincere and like she meant it.

"Hua," he huffed. "Is that a hint of jealousy I hear in your voice?" He was interested to know how much it had affected her.

"You would love that, wouldn't you? I'd drown myself in the lake before I'd be jealous of your new Poodle!"

"You know, I have to agree with you for the first time since we met. She does look like a dog."

Ginny laughed and Harry joined her. They were making jokes about how Pansy would look like if she was wagging a tail. They calmed down after couple of good laughs, and then Ginny turned to him seriously. "So, why did you kiss her?"

Because it drives me mad when I see you kiss Dean, Harry thought to himself. No, she doesn't need to know that. Harry shrugged. "I had a free snog, why would I pass the opportunity?" he said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Guys," Ginny rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath.

"So, you're saying you aren't jealous? Not even a little bit?" he pressed.

Ginny shook her head and said innocently, "No, not at all. You know, if I knew better, I'd say you want me to be jealous."

"No, I'm just saying that because you can't judge me for who I go out with or who I kiss, because you kiss your boyfriend in every corner or a broom cupboard in school!" he said defensively.

"Not that I can't do that, because he is my boyfriend after all, unlike you, taking advantage from every girl you see. But I can't blame you; it's obvious you're too scared of commitment. And just for you know, I think you're the one having problem with me snogging my boyfriend, and not the other way around."

Harry was speechless for a second, but then he regained his composure and said, "Who, me? No, not at all."

Madam Pomfrey came back just then and helped them put a plaster on their broken hands.

By dinner time, Harry and Ginny were released from the hospital wing. Harry walked to the common room, to check if Draco and Blaise were there, since he hadn't seen them since lunch, but they weren't anywhere to be found. The common room was deserted.

Harry collapsed on the couch in front of the crackling fire, examining the plaster cast on his arm. A tap on the window got his attention and he looked up and saw a ghost owl waiting at the window sill, a letter at his beak.

Harry recognized the owl as Merrill, his father's owl. He got up from the couch and strode to the window to let Merrill in. The owl dropped the letter in Harry's free hand and waited in the warm room, while Harry read the letter.

Dear Harry,

We heard what happened today at the game from Remus. We hope you are feeling okay now and that you will be able to use your arm again really soon. Sorry we couldn't come visit you, but we were loaded with work.

The handwriting style changed. Harry knew the first paragraph was written by his father, and the rest of the letter, as he saw, was written by his mother.

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, HARRY? Chasing the Snitch when you see a Bludger coming your way! You could have been killed! If you do that again, I swear I'll have you off the team in a second, and I don't care if you are the Captain (and thank you really for telling us they picked you, by the way)! You had to catch your father's Quidditch madness, didn't you?

Anyway, sweetie, have fun and get well soon. We'll see you at Christmas (if not sooner).

Love,

Mum and Dad.

P.S. If you're interested to know, Padfoot is fine and really misses you!

Harry groaned when he folded the letter. Thank god, they haven't come visit me! That could have been so humiliating when Ginny was there! He thought. He gave Merrill a light scratch behind his head and released him to go back home.

His stomach grumbled, and he decided to go meet his friends at the Great Hall.

He walked up to the Slytherin table and sat in the vacant seat Draco had saved for him.

"Hey, you okay?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, better. Thanks." Harry started to load his plate with food. "Did they say anything? You know, about the game?"

"Not yet, but Dumbledore walked in just a few minutes ago, Snape and McGonagall right behind him, so they must have been in a meeting, discussing the matter," Blaise answered.

Harry nodded in understanding as he took the first bite of his roasted chicken.

"So, did you lovebirds do something while no one was around?" Draco asked cheekily, playing with the potatoes on his plate, and separating them from the carrots. He and Blaise sniggered.

"She has a boyfriend," Harry informed him.

"That didn't stop you before."

"Well, I'm starting to let go. She may be pretty, but she's not my type," he said casually.

Suddenly, Dumbledore rose from his seat and the chattering in the Hall died down at once.

"I bet you're all dying to know which house won the game," he started to say. Murmuring could be heard from all four tables, and Dumbledore had to clear his throat to gain silence and attention again. "It was decided the Gryffindor house will get 150 points for catching the Snitch –"

All the students at the Gryffindor table jumped and screamed from happiness at those words, and the Slytherins all objected and rose with anger, including Harry, Draco and Blaise.

"I didn't finish!" Dumbledore cut them off, and they all froze. "But, since the Slytherins caught the Snitch as well, we had to consider the circumstances, and so they should also have 150 points." Harry's face lit up and he felt excited. "Therefore, Slytherin house is in the lead with 40 points more than Gryffindor. Slytherin house is the winner of today's game!"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. He waited all day to hear those words, and now, when all his housemates jumped, screamed and hugged each other joyfully, he just gaped at empty air while everyone clapped him on the back.

The Gryffindors looked disappointed and they all sulked, along with the Ravensclaws and the Hufflepuffs.

Harry saw Ron comforting his team members. He drank a toast of pumpkin juice with all the other Slytherins.

When they walked out of the Great Hall, they met Ron and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team at the exit.

"You are all invited to the great celebration of our victory in our common room," Draco said to them in a high voice. "Oh, sorry, Purebloods only, and Weasels are out," he added and Harry couldn't help but laugh at sight of their grumpy faces, not even slightly caring that Ginny was one of them.

A/N: There is something I forgot to say: I put some clues in the previous chapter, which will be more prominent later on. I'll put more clues in next chapters. Can you guess what the clues were?

Also, I thought it will be more interesting to give the chapter names, so I did. What do you think?

And did you see the poster I made? No? Go check it right now before you review and then post your review because I've been through hell with this chapter, and you better review it, or else... :-p

Chapter 9 – Half-truths:

He didn't mean to hurt her like that, but he knew he did. The look in her eyes told him how hurt she was when he laughed at her. What was he thinking? How could he let her go when his feelings for her just seemed to get stronger every day? But now it was too late. He guessed she hated him now more than ever before, and he didn't know how to fix it. He was angry with himself for getting so caught up in his pride that he listened more to his head than to his heart.

They called the party off for the night, and now he was sitting alone at a table in the corner of the slightly dimmed common room. He laid his head in his one good hand, trying to think of a solution to his problem. He needed Ginny to forgive him. He was getting along with her and made a little progress in talking with her and sharing a few laughs, but now he blew it all up.

Harry groaned in frustration and looked down at the empty sheet of parchment before him, lying untouched on the table. An hour had passed and he still didn't know what to write. Every time he started to write something, he stopped and cleared the paper with his wand, thinking the words weren't meaningful enough.

Harry glanced at his watch, now worn on his right wrist, since his left arm was wrapped in a cast. The time was one fifty in the morning. He was tired, but knew that now was the best time for him to write an apology to Ginny, since his friends were all asleep.

He let out a loud yawn and felt his eyes fall to narrow slits, but he forced them open when he felt them close against his will. He dipped his quill in the ink bottle. Not thinking clearly and his tiredness taking over his mind and body, his fingers lost the grip on the quill and it dropped back into the ink bottle. He hadn't even noticed he folded his right hand on the table and gently laid his head to rest on it. Soon he fell into a deep sleep.

He awoke with a smile on his face, and with an ache in his neck. The pain was sufferable and he could ignore it because he just had the most beautiful dream about Ginny. They were walking together down the main street of Hogsmeade, hand in hand. They looked like the

happiest couple in the world. Only he acknowledged the fact that they weren't a couple, not even one step close to be a couple.

And then he remembered. Today was Halloween, and the teachers allowed the students to visit Hogsmeade on the short holiday, just before the great feast at the evening.

"Have a good sleep?" he recognized Draco's voice coming from the door leading to the boys' dormitories. "You look like someone taped your cheeks to your ears."

Harry squinted at him with a frown and let the smile on his face disappear. He raised his head and started to search the table for his glasses, but then Draco said, "On your head, you dolt." Harry awkwardly reached for his glasses and put them on properly. "Did you sleep here all night?"

Harry nodded and rubbed his sore neck. "I think I stretched my neck," he said in a sleepy voice. He leaned back in his armchair and felt a sudden pain in his back as well. "Oww! And my back," he added with a wince.

Harry took a look at Draco and saw he was already dressed. "Going to breakfast?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah. Blaise is still in the shower. I'll see you two later," he said and walked out of the common room.

Harry checked that he was totally alone in the room, and when he saw there was nobody in sight, he remembered the letter he forgot to write. He lost all the ideas he wanted to say in the letter and settled for a simple, yet poor apology:

Ginny,

I'm sorry.

Harry.

He knew it wasn't much, but he couldn't think of anything else to write while he was still drowsy from sleep. He walked into his room and luckily, he found Hedwig in her cage, drinking water. "Hey girl, can you deliver this to Ginny Weasley at the Gryffindor table?" Hedwig hooted once in agreement, took the note from Harry in her beak and flew out of the window.

When Blaise walked out of the shower, Harry convinced him to wait for him until he was ready, so they could go together to the Great Hall. He didn't fancy going there and seeing that he and Draco had already eaten.

It was about ten minutes later when they walked into the Great Hall, and over to the Slytherin table. They saw Draco reading a letter, and at the sight of them he hid it in his robe.

"What was that?" Harry and Blaise asked in unison. They sat across from Draco, and looked suspiciously at him.

"Nothing," Draco answered rather quickly. "Mother wanted to make sure I was coming home for Christmas, that's all."

"But Christmas is like in two months away," Blaise said.

"Yeah, well, Mother is very busy these days. She gets like this around Halloween every year."

"Oh, okay."

"Say, are you coming to Hogsmeade later?" Harry asked them.

"I don't feel like it," Draco said. He folded his arms together and looked disturbed. Harry didn't want to get into talking about what disturbed him. He knew it was about his father. Perhaps it was something his mother wrote in the letter, and he didn't want to discuss it with them.

"Er – How about you, Blaise?"

"All right, I'll come," he answered in a much better mood than Draco.

While Draco turned to read his copy of the Sunday Prophet and Blaise stared at Pansy and daydreamed, Harry turned to look at the Gryffindor table. Ginny just got his note, and she was stroking Hedwig affectionately while she read it.

"I need to complete a few essays, so I'll be in the common room," Draco said, still a bit gloomy. Blaise agreed to accompany him and told Harry to meet him at the entrance hall that afternoon, before he left with Draco.

When Harry walked out of the Great Hall, he spotted Ginny walk out on the grounds with Hermione Granger. Without even thinking he called her name.

She did not turn around, although she recognized his voice. He ran up to meet her, but she grabbed hold on Hermione's forearm and dragged her away.

"Come on, Ginny, wait a second!"

She stopped, but her back was facing him.

He finally reached her, breathless. He breathed heavily, trying to get his normal breath back. "I – want – to talk – to you," he said, his lungs still fighting for fresh air. "Alone."

She turned around slowly. Her eyes were closed and her lips were pressed together. She opened them briefly as a heavy sigh left her mouth. "Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of Hermione."

Her eyes, now fully open, were unusually dark, and she frowned at him. Hermione looked uncomfortable at the situation and blushed. Harry wanted to object, but thought it could be his only shot, so he went for it.

"All right. Did you get my note?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Please stop playing innocent. Do you forgive me or not?" he said, controlling his temper, and did his best not to snap at her.

"Not," she replied.

"Why? I've asked for your forgiveness –"

She cut him off before he could say anything else. "Oh, you mean your stinky 'sorry'? I don't really give a damn about it. There's nothing for me to forgive because I'm not talking to you! We are not friends or any kind of colleagues. So, please, for the last time, leave me alone. I don't want you to follow me around anymore. Please let it go..."

She started to walk back to the castle. Hermione looked at him for a second, her look unreadable, before she ran to meet with her.

"I'll tell Dean!" he shouted at her. She stopped her tracks and turned to look at him again.

"Tell Dean what?" she asked, still sounding quite angry with him. She was walking back to him, leaving Hermione behind.

"About our kiss," he whispered, looking up to see if Hermione was listening, even that he knew she already knew all about it.

"You mean your kiss," Ginny corrected.

"No, you kissed me back and that's what made it our kiss. And I think your boyfriend should know what you are doing behind his back."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Fine, tell him. Do whatever you want. I don't care anymore, but there's just one last thing you need to know: you're a coward."

And with that she walked back to Hermione, not looking back at him, and they headed back to the castle.

Harry reviewed all the things she just said to him. When she said she wasn't forgiving him and that they weren't friends, he felt like someone slapped him across his face. She wanted him to let go of the whole thing. She actually begged him for that. He didn't look at the situation from her point of view. He acted like Blaise acted around Pansy. Well, maybe less pathetic, but he was still a bit obsessed with her.

He admired everything about her. Her fiery red hair, the little freckles on her nose and cheeks, her pink lips, her brown eyes. He admired her talent in Quidditch. He even admired the way she yelled at him.

He was obsessed.

Now who's pathetic? he thought.

All he wanted was to know if she forgave him, and all he did was hurt her more.

What was about this girl who crept into his mind and insisted not to leave it? No girl ever made him feel this way. So why her? Why now? And most importantly, how could he make her forgive him after what he did to her?

He knew that he would do anything to make her feel better.

Harry thought of these things while he walked around the corridors, passing the time until he would have to meet Blaise. He didn't notice where he was going, his legs led the way.

"Harry!" someone suddenly called. Footsteps came from behind him, and Harry turned around and saw Draco walking over to him. "What are you doing here? Don't you have to meet Blaise?" he asked.

"Um, I was just walking to pass the time, I guess I should –"

A "Shhh!" cut him off in the middle of the sentence. Harry and Draco shot their heads up in searching for the source of the sound.

"What was that?" Harry asked, sensing something fishy.

"I think it came from there," Draco said, pointing to a door at the end of the corridor. "This is the seventh floor, right?"

Harry, who wasn't so sure where his legs really took him, just nodded. "I didn't know there are classrooms here."

"There aren't any. That door wasn't here when I first saw you." Harry looked at him like he's gone mad. "Don't look at me like that! It was a blank wall just a minute ago, and now there's a door over there!"

"All right, let's say I believe you, what do you reckon we should do?" Harry asked, eyeing the door suspiciously.

"Let's open it," Draco said when he turned to look at Harry with a wide smirk on his face.

Harry smirked back, loving the idea. They walked together to the door with light steps. When they reached it, they leaned against the wall and heard murmuring coming from the other side. Draco looked at Harry for confirmation for doing the next move. Harry nodded his agreement, and Draco gripped the handle of the door, and swung it wide open.

The sight of the two Slytherins at the door gave the four occupants of the room a start. Harry and Draco never thought they would meet the two Weasleys and their significant others when they opened the door.

The four of them sat on a large carpet in the middle of the room, which was lighted only by candles. As they saw them, they all rose from the floor.

Ron, who looked very much shocked at Draco and Harry's appearance at the door, dropped something furry, which disappeared from view before Harry even had the chance to see what it actually was.

Hermione, unlike Ron, didn't waste time in gaping at them, and started to collect all their stuff from the floor. There was a cauldron, a few potions vials, couple of books and an old parchment. While she

tried to shove everything into her school bag, she muttered something that sounded like 'Why didn't we see them coming?'

"I wouldn't move if I were you, Granger," Draco said, walking into the room slowly.

Harry walked behind him, taking a look around of the room. He saw Ginny and Dean standing now at the corner, looking back at him. "We have to stop meeting like this," he said to them with a wink. They just pouted at him. Dean had a look of disgust on his face.

"What are you doing here? Practicing Potions?" Draco continued, talking to Hermione.

"No, founding a cult," she said, standing back up.

Ron suddenly seemed to pull himself out of his state of shock. "This is a private Prefect meeting, so if you don't mind, we will very appreciate it if you two leave now!"

Hermione and Dean bowed their heads and Ginny smacked her forehead, shook her head and sighed, "Oh, Ron!" Ron, however, didn't realize his mistake yet, and looked puzzled.

"A private Prefect meeting, eh? Did you hear that Harry? Well, I guess you forgot to invite me than." Draco looked around and stared at Dean. "And what's this? I didn't know Mr. Thomas was filling my place, that's so thoughtful of you!" he said in a mocking voice, but at the same time looked dangerously at them.

"I – Well..." Ron tried to say, the realization finally sinking in on him, but he couldn't manage to say anything else.

"I should really inform Professor Dumbledore about his Gryffindor Prefects. I don't know why he chose you, Weasel. You can't even put one plus one together!"

"Hey, that's not true!" Ron called.

Draco ignored him. "Anyway, I'm confiscating everything in this room –" Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Draco held his hand up and went on, "Unless you want me to report the Headmaster about your illegal activities. I bet he will take your Prefect badge away."

"Fine!" she huffed and picked up her school bag. "Let's go, guys."

Ron, Dean and Ginny started to walk to the door just as Hermione reached it, but then Draco called and they all stopped. "Oh, Granger, I believe you have things in your bag. If you don't mind, leave them here. Dumbledore won't be so pleased with you if you don't..."

Flicking his Prefect badge with his fingers at her, Draco looked very satisfied when Hermione walked over to him and handed him the old piece of parchment she put in her bag. She turned on her heel and left the room.

Harry was now leaning against the open door. When Ron and Dean left after Hermione, Ginny was the last in the line. He looked at her, and when she walked by past him, he held her by her hand to stop her. "I wanted you to know that I really am sorry for what I've done," he whispered to her. She looked down at his hand, where he held her, and he took it back.

"How touchy," Draco muttered at them. At the sound of his voice, Ginny remembered he was there too, and she left without looking back.

"What do you want to do with this stuff?" Harry asked, like he wasn't embarrassed at all from Draco's last comment.

"I don't know. I'll ask Snape what to do with it. He'll probably make Weasel and Granger clean it up anyway." Draco walked over to the cauldron in the middle of the room. Inside there was a thick dark brown potion, still bubbling, like the cauldron was on the fire. "Eww, what do you think they were trying to make? It smells awful!"

Harry glanced at his watch. It was four fifty, and he was late to meet Blaise. "I better go, or else Blaise will get all whiny at me." He turned

to talk in a tone that sounded a lot like Blaise's voice, "Where have you been, Harry? I'm waiting for you forever! And I missed Pansy! Do you know how much I wanted to walk after her all the way to Hogsmeade?"

Draco chuckled at the imitation and walked with Harry out of the room, down to the Great Hall.

"Say, Draco, when you met me before, you asked what I was doing here, but the real question is what were you doing here?" Harry asked, a bit amused.

"Er – Never mind, it's not important," Draco excused and quickly changed the subject. "So you're off to meet Blaise right now, hua?"

"Yeah. Are you sure you don't want to come with us? Just for two hours, it'll be fun," Harry tried to convince Draco again.

"No thanks, I'll stay here," he said when he looked closely at the parchment he was still holding.

"What is that, anyway?"

"Looks like sort of a map to me."

"Let me see." Harry took the parchment from him, and before he could observe it, Professor Lupin ran into them.

"Oh, Harry, I'm glad I ran into you," he said.

"Literally," Draco muttered. "I'll see you later at the feast, Harry."

Harry nodded, and looked back at his teacher, who he was now totally alone with. "What did you want, Professor? It's not going to take long, is it? Because Blaise is waiting for me at the entrance hall for the past fifty five minutes or so..."

"No, it'll be short, I promise. I wanted to ask you if it's okay if I join you and your parents for Christmas Eve."

Was everyone getting ready for Christmas already? Harry thought.

"It's not around a full moon this year?" he asked.

Lupin shook his head, but held a smile on his face. "Not this year, finally. I haven't celebrated Christmas properly for so many years."

"Did you already discuss it with my parents?"

"Yes, I did. I was actually worried about your reaction, since you were just a young child when I last celebrated Christmas with your family."

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea," he said. Lupin's smile faded slowly, but then Harry smiled at him. "Just kidding, it's fine by me." Lupin sighed with relief and smiled back. "Well, I've got to go," Harry said, gesturing with his hand to the staircase heading down to the entrance hall. He hadn't noticed he waved the map right in front of Lupin's face.

Lupin suddenly turned to him with curiosity as he saw the map, "Harry, what is that?" He pointed to the map. His eyes were wide, like they were surprised at something and there was hope in them all the same.

"Oh, Draco just confiscated it from a group of... Gryffindors, just a Prefect duty, you know. He said it looks like a map, but I haven't had the chance to look at it myself."

"A map, he said? Can I have a look at it?"

Harry shrugged and handed the map to the Professor. If it was possible, his eyes grew ever wider than before as he looked down at the parchment.

"Oh dear," Lupin whispered to himself. "I haven't seen this for so long..."

"What is it?" Harry asked, trying to take a peek at the parchment.

"I – I'll explain later. I'm taking it, okay?"

"Er – Okay..." Harry looked at him suspiciously, thinking everyone around him have gone mad today.

"All right," Lupin said nervously. "Well, off you go to meet your friend!"

Harry and Lupin separated. He headed down to meet Blaise, and found him pacing from side to side near the great oak doors.

"Harry! Where have you been? I'm waiting for you forever! And I missed Pansy! Do you know how much I wanted to –"

"Hold on," Harry said, holding his right hand to stop his friend from saying another word, and then he started to rub his temple. "I'm getting a déjà-vu."

"Hua?" Blaise looked confused.

Harry shook his head and chuckled. "Never mind. Ready to go?"
"When are we going to use all of this?" Blaise asked Harry when they left Zonko's with a large bag containing at least 15 Dungbombs and fireworks.

"You'll see," Harry said mischievously.

"And what if Filch catches us with this bag?"

"You're such a coward. And besides, Filch never suspects Slytherins with pranks like that."

"All right, what do we do now?"

"Let's go grab a cup of butterbeer and then head back to the castle."

As they walked to The Three Broomsticks, they neared Honeydukes. The door to the sweetshop opened and two girls exited. Blaise froze in his place when Pansy and Millicent stood now right in front of them.

"Oh, look who it is," Pansy said in an angry tone, looking at Harry.
"Hello, Potter."

"Pansy," Harry said indifferently. "Er – Remember when I told you about my friend Blaise?" He clapped Blaise's shoulder hard, almost causing him to fall forward.

"Oh, yes, the shy one," she said, examining Blaise from head to toe. He blushed at her look.

"Blaise, why don't you tell Pansy what you told me about her the other day?" Harry looked at his friend with a hint in his eyes.

However, it took Blaise a minute to catch that. "What did I tell y...? – Oh, you mean that thing?"

"That's right Blaise. You keep this bag safe, okay? And I'll be at The Three Broomsticks."

He left them alone and looked back, he saw Blaise actually talking to Pansy. He was being shy around her, but Harry knew that as he will spend more time with her, he was sure to get more confident.

Mission accomplished, Harry thought. Now I just hope Blaise won't mess it up.

"But everybody is at The Three Broomsticks!"

"That's exactly why I want to go there!"

Harry heard two people arguing near by. He looked up to see it was none other than Dean and Ginny, who were standing in front of the pub, blocking the way in. Ginny looked crossed at Dean, and they seemed to have just had a fight. Since they were standing in front of the entrance to the pub, Harry couldn't get in. It was too awkward to go there and ask them to move so he could enter, so he just waited for them to move on their own.

"But in Madam Puddifoot's we can talk in private. If we enter The Three Broomsticks, your brother and his girlfriend will make us sit with them, and then it wouldn't be a date!" Dean said loudly.

"So you're not coming inside?" Ginny already seemed to make up her mind she wanted to go into the pub, other than the coffee shop.

"No!"

"Then I'm going by myself."

"Oh, no you don't!" Dean said. He grabbed her arm and started to pull her away from the pub.

That was Harry's shot to get inside, but he couldn't move at the sight of Ginny being dragged like this.

"What are you doing, Dean Thomas? Are you seriously going to drag me into this stupid café? Let go of my arm now!"

He couldn't stand it anymore. The anger just burst out. And suddenly he found himself pacing toward them. "Hey!" he called. He didn't know what Ginny was doing in Hogsmeade. Didn't she say she wanted to study? Maybe Dean made her go, like he was making her go with him right now.

Dean stopped dragging Ginny, but didn't let go of her arm. He and Ginny turned around to see who called to them, and saw it was Harry. Ginny looked flushed, but Dean moaned his exasperation. "Great! What do you want?"

"You heard what she said. She can walk, you know. And surely she can make up her own mind and make her own decisions. Now let her go," Harry said, feeling a bit of fury himself.

Did she still think he was a coward, sticking up for her like that?

"Why don't you go play the hero someplace else, hua Potter? Stop sticking your large nose in other people's business! Ginny told me

you aren't leaving her alone, so why don't you just back off now, before you get seriously hurt?"

"Dean, come on. Let's just go somewhere and forget the whole thing?" Ginny said, seeing the anger in their eyes. She rubbed Dean's shoulder in a calming way, afraid he'd start something with Harry.

"No, wait a second Ginny. I had enough of this guy. He needs to learn when to stay away."

Harry laughed hollowly. "What are you going to do, hex me?"

"You bet I am," Dean said, pulling out his wand.

Let him hex me, Harry thought. He didn't pull out his own wand, but just stood there, watching them. "See who your boyfriend is, Ginny? You don't deserve him. Look how he treats you!"

"Don't talk to her!" Dean growled.

"Make me!" Harry shot back.

Dean couldn't stand it any longer. He reached out his hands and pushed Harry backwards.

"Don't you touch me, you stinking Mudb –" he stopped, thinking hard on his promise to Sirius. Don't say that word. Do not finish this sentence! he inwardly told himself.

"What the matter, Potter? Cat got your tongue?" Dean taunted. "Spill it out! Let me help you: M - U - D –"

"Dean!" Ginny yelled.

"Oh, never mind!" Dean muttered. He forgot he held his wand, and he started to push Harry harder in the chest. Harry didn't like the idea of being pushed that hard, and started to push Dean back at the same force he used on him. They soon started to use their fists, hitting each other in every possible place.

"Stop it!" Ginny shrieked. "Stop it right now! Dean!"

People, some were Hogwarts students and some were town villagers, were all around and watched them fight, but neither of them try to separate them. Harry and Dean broke after a minute. Dean pointed his wand at Harry and looked absolutely livid.

"Dean, no! Don't you dare!" Ginny warned. She was a bit frightened he would do something completely stupid. She knew it was all because of her.

But Dean hadn't listened, and he shot a stunner at Harry before Harry could even draw his wand to defend himself. Harry hit the ground and lay there motionless, observed by the crowd that gathered all around them. They all the gasped with shock and took a step back from Dean. He pocketed his wand and walked back to Ginny like nothing had happened, ignoring all the people who watched him.

"What did you do?" Ginny asked furiously.

"Nothing, he deserved it. Now let's go back to the castle," he whispered to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

She freed herself from the embrace. She didn't care even if the whole town was watching her. She had something to say, and she needed to get it out. "No! I won't go with you! You started this fight! You threatened to hurt him, and all he did was try to make sure I was all right! He didn't even say the whole word!"

"He didn't say it because you were here! Ginny, this guy has seriously problems. He's infatuated with you, can't you see that?" Dean argued.

"He didn't even pull out his wand and you went and stunned him!" She looked around and saw she was still the centre of interest of the crowd around them, and she was sick of it. "Why are you still watching? Don't you have anything better to do?" Soon, she and Dean were alone again. Harry was still lying unconscious on the ground.

"You defend him? After what he's done to you, you defend him? This Slytherin git? Why?"

Ginny didn't answer. She bowed her head and thought what to say. It's time that Dean will know the truth. "Because I think he's better than you. He's a better person, a better looking guy and a better kisser."

"What do you mean a better kisser? You kissed him?" Dean shouted.

"Yes, and in spite of everything I told myself, I don't regret it either. Now hear me out on the thing I'm going to say right now, because I'm not going to repeat it for you. I'm not interested in you anymore, we're over."

Dean looked shocked. "But Ginny –"

"Bye Dean," she said and he walked off angrily.

Ginny bent down to Harry, and put his head in her lap. She pulled out her wand and pointed it to him. "Ennervate."

Harry's eyes slowly opened. He blinked a few times, and tried to remember where he was. He slowly looked around, and the hints of red hair from above him came into view. He looked up and saw Ginny's face smiling softly at him.

He shot up as he remembered what just happened. He looked around and searched for Dean, but he wasn't in sight.

"It's okay, he's gone," Ginny said, getting up and sweeping dust off her robes. "Er – I wanted to say I'm –" she started to say, but someone cut her off.

"Harry!" Blaise shouted from behind. Harry turned around and saw Blaise running towards him. "Harry," he breathed when he stopped in front of him, trying to catch his breath. "I just heard what happened. I was with Pansy and I heard you got stunned, so I ran as fast as I could..." he gulped when he finished talking.

Harry took a quick look at Ginny. He wondered what happened while he was out. Where did Dean go and why did he wake up in Ginny's lap? "Let's go Blaise," he said quietly.

"Are you sure you want –" Blaise started to say, but Harry cut him off.

"Yes, I'm sure. Let's go," he said more firmly.

They started to walk away to the castle, but Ginny called out. "Wait!"

Harry didn't turn around. He chased after this girl for ages. Let her chase him now, if she really wanted. Even though, he couldn't help but think that all the pursuing wasn't worth it.

A/N: Here you go, the longest chapter I ever written, and it's because you had to wait a lot. I hope it was worth the wait.

So things might not brighten for Harry in this chapter, but definitely brightened for Ginny. No more Dean, thank god. Too bad Harry doesn't know that. Yet. Will he in the next chapter? You just have to wait and see.

Do not forget to review! Thank you for your reading and hope you enjoyed.

Chapter 10 – The Explained and the Unexplained:

Harry watched his reflection in the mirror. His face was a bit pale, but nothing more serious than that. He was alone in the boys' loo back at Hogwarts, as he needed some time by himself, just to think about some things that bothered him.

What just happened? his voice echoed in his head. I let Dean Thomas take me down without even trying to fight him back. What kind of a sissy am I?

He held on to the sink's sides tightly, and his knuckles went white from the grip, like he was afraid to fall, and this was his only way to support himself. Without taking his eyes off the mirror, he reached for the tap, turned it on and allowed the water flow down in the sink. He cupped his hand to fill it with water. He closed his eyes as he splashed the water on his face. He felt the cold drops slowly dripping down on his cheeks and forehead, caressing and tickling him, and distracting him for a short moment, before he went back to reality.

He was quite dazed from the whole scene back in Hogsmeade. He was knocked down by Dean Thomas, a Gryffindor, a Mudblood (he will say it to him right in the face if he has the chance, no matter how many times he will hear Sirius yelling at him to shut up. Dean deserved this title, after what he did to him). He felt nothing but hatred towards him right then, and he loathed him more than ever before. Not only he had Ginny, but also because she treated her like trash.

Harry touched his cheeks, in try to see if the whole thing was real. What is happening to me? Am I losing it? Ginny was right, I am a coward. Coward for not defending myself and my honor. For god's sake, I'm a Slytherin! I should have found my courage and fight him like a winner, like a real Slytherin would have done, and not depend myself because Ginny Weasley was there!

'That girl is nothing but trouble,' said a voice in Harry's head.

I know, I'm trying to stay away from her, but still... there's something about her I can't get away from. It's like a magnet, which draws me to her every time I'm near her, Harry defended.

'You have to pull yourself together! She will only cause you more pain! Isn't it enough what she's done to you thus far? No good will come out of it. But you know this is fixable, so go on and fix it!'

But I –

'Coward...' the voice called, whispering inside his head and mocking him.

"I am not a coward!" Harry wasn't aware he shouted at the mirror. Since the room was empty, he could hear the word 'coward' playing over and over again in a series of echoes.

'Then prove it,' the voice dared.

Harry let out a long sigh and for a short moment considered hitting the mirror with his fist, but he kept his temper down. With a last look at his reflection, he caught the look in his eyes. They were dark green from anger, not their usual emerald green. "Fine," he said, as he left the room. "I will."

He walked to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast and found it decorated as it always was on Halloween: there were pumpkins floating in the air, scary faces craved on them and candles placed inside of them, illuminating the House tables underneath with soft dimmed light. The House tables were filled with all kinds of sweets and special meals for the feast, served on the festive golden plates. Screeches could be heard from up above the crowd of students and teachers, and when Harry looked up, he saw a pack of bats flying close to the enchanted ceiling of the Hall.

"There you are!" Blaise said when Harry sat down next to him and helped himself to his first dish. "I thought you were going to miss it."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," said Harry, trying his best to smile. The thoughts of the Hogsmeade trip were still floating in his head, but soon those thoughts were replaced by the Halloween spirit, and they cheered him up. "This Halloween will be the one this school will remember for ages! Is everything set up?"

Blaise nodded, a smirk playing on his lips. "Yep, just like you told me." He checked his watch and added, "Let's see if it will be right on time, shall we? Oh, it should start in 4... 3... 2... 1 –" and he ended with clicking his fingers.

Right then, a few sharp whistles came out of nowhere, those were soon enough joined with tails of smoke in many shapes and colors. Sparks of dust sprinkled on the crowd of the onlookers, and some of them 'oohed' with awe, as at least 15 fireworks zoomed in the air and over their heads. Everyone was hypnotized at the marvelous display. A few minutes later, everything went quiet after each of the fireworks exploded with a loud CRACK and produced all kinds of shapes and forms; they spattered the remaining dust around the Hall. As soon as everyone was sure it was over, every student in the Hall broke into applause. Even a few teachers seemed to enjoy it, Dumbledore was one of them, and he seemed to enjoy it the most.

When Harry looked around the staff table, he was sure Dumbledore nodded to him with a small smile. Harry never had talked to the Headmaster more than a student should have, but his parents were in good terms with him. How did he know I was up to it? I hope I won't get in trouble for it...

Despite that, Harry couldn't help but laugh along with Blaise after it all ended. It was planned that most of the dust will fall right above the Gryffindor table. Sneaking a look at Ron Weasley, Harry saw him coughing out a small cloud of glittering dust from his mouth and he laughed harder.

Blaise sighed with satisfaction. "Ahh... thanks Harry, for convincing me to do it. Merlin knows how boring this school can get sometimes, even around the holidays. We all need a bit of action and a laugh or two from time to time."

"Say, how many were there?" Harry asked. "It seemed like there were less than fifteen."

"Fourteen, you're right. I counted twice. I think I lost one when I dropped the bag. Sorry."

"You dropped the bag? You klutz!"

"I know, sorry, but I think someone ran into me while I was talking with Pansy, and caused me to drop the bag. It was weird, though, I didn't see anyone around but Pansy."

"Well, maybe you were just nervous around her, so you imagined it. You still haven't told me what exactly happened with her. Anyway, you still lost one, so you owe me 10 Sickles for it."

"Fine, I'll pay you back later."

"Oh, look," Harry said suddenly, pointing in the direction of the staff table, where, on the right end sat Filch, looking very furious at the filth the fireworks left around the Hall. "I reckon he won't sleep for days just because of it," he sniggered.

"Gosh, too bad Draco wasn't here to see it," Blaise said with another sigh. "He would have loved it!"

Harry looked around and realized Draco was indeed missing. "Where is he?"

Blaise shrugged indifferently. "In the common room, I guess."

"What is he doing there?" Harry asked confusedly, frowning.

"Avoiding being here, of course." When that didn't seem to make any sense whatsoever or answer Harry's question, Blaise went on, "He's doing it every year on Halloween. Haven't you ever noticed?"

Harry was shocked hearing this news. Every year? How is it that Draco had managed to avoid Halloween for the past six years without Harry noticing it? How come he never talked about it? And what did that make of Harry, who supposed to be Draco's best friend? He never knew about it, nor did he ever notice Draco's reaction to Halloween like Blaise had. Was Harry so self-centered that he didn't pay attention to his best friend?

"Are you serious?" he asked. Blaise nodded. "But why?"

"I dunno. I guess he doesn't like Halloween that much. That's why I didn't ask him this morning to come to Hogsmeade with us."

"He's been a bit funny lately, don't you think?"

"I suppose," Blaise shrugged again.

Harry got from his seat, not feeling hungry anymore or in the mood for the feast. "Come on."

"What? Where to?" Blaise was taken aback by this.

"To see if he's all right. Come on, we'll grab something from the kitchens later," he said.

Reluctant to leave the feast (or his plate of apple pie), Blaise joined Harry and they left the Hall. For some reason, Harry could feel someone was watching him leave, but he didn't really care about that right now. At the moment, the only thing that occupied his mind was whatever was going on with Draco. Harry's mind was so busy in trying to think and figure out what would make Draco escape the Halloween feast every year, that he didn't even notice (or cared) that the Head Boy just ran into him on his way to the Great Hall from the grounds. Harry and Blaise just hurried themselves down to the dungeons.

The Slytherin common room was almost empty, there were only two second years talking by the fireplace. Harry didn't even care why they were there and not at the Great Hall, enjoying the feast, like everyone. Everyone, except Draco, who, they found in their dormitory.

There was something fishy going on, Harry could sense it. They caught Draco in a very odd situation. Draco was leaning over an open window by his bed. The cold night air of the season blew into the room and a few candles went out. Draco looked like he was about to sneak out of the room. At the sound of the door opening, he froze, and slowly backed away from the window, but did not turn around.

He reached forward again and closed the window, letting the room fill with heat again. Then, he quietly spoke. "What are you doing here?" he asked, he bowed his head and his back still turned to them. It was like he knew it was them, even though their eyes did not meet.

"Shouldn't we ask you that?" Harry asked, taking a look around the room. "What's going on? Why weren't you at the feast? Why are you trying to sneak out of the window? And why is my trunk open?" he said once he noticed his trunk was pulled from under his four-poster bed and it was open. He hurried to see what happened.

His clothes and books and other personal belongings were all messed up inside. It wasn't the usual mess Harry left behind, but worse. Bottles of ink were broken and had stained a pair of socks and a few pairs of underwear; a few pages from his Transfiguration book were torn out, and some clothes were poured out of the trunk to the floor, like it exploded, among them was the most personal and important object of all, his father's old Invisibility Cloak, which he nicked just before returning to school. "You went through my stuff?" Harry felt his face flush as his temper started to rise. "Did you take my Invisibility Cloak, Draco?"

"No! Whoa, hold on with the questions, will you? I can explain," Draco said, now finally looking back at Harry.

"Than let's hear it," Harry demanded. "You had no right to use that cloak! It's not even mine! My father will kill me if he finds out I took it. I haven't used it yet, so what gives you the right to go through my stuff and take whatever you want? I didn't show it to you so you could use it without asking me! I never even said you could use it!"

"Harry! Let him talk!" Blaise interrupted, attempting to cool him down.

"Fine. Go on, Draco, talk."

Draco lay down on his bed and adjusted the pillows behind his head to look better at Harry. "I wasn't trying to sneak out. I just opened the window to get some fresh air," he said calmly.

"And my trunk? What were you looking for?"

"Just a quill and a bottle of ink. I desperately needed to write a letter, and I just ran out of ink, and my quill broke, I couldn't find my spare one. I didn't think you would mind if I borrow one from you."

"No, of course I don't mind," Harry said, calming down a bit, but he was still curious and missed some answers. "Who was that letter you wrote for?"

"My mother, if you must know. She owled me and said she felt a bit sick this past week and I got worried, so I owled back. I'm sorry for trashing your trunk. Here, let me fix it." He pulled out his wand and said the spell. The contents of Harry's trunk flew back inside and everything was clean and fixed again.

"So you didn't use my cloak?" Harry went on, after he had slid the trunk back under his bed.

"No. What for? What would I do with it? Walk around the school and scare first years to death?"

"That could have been one great Halloween joke!" Blaise said excitedly. "You should've seen what we did in the Great Hall earlier!"

"I thought I heard some explosions," Draco said softly. "You didn't bomb the Hall, did you? Because if you did, at least I hope a few Gryffindors were scarred."

Draco didn't sound like he was joking. Even when he talked or joked about hurting Gryffindors like he always did, his tone was different. Harry thought he was being weird. This calm manner didn't suit Draco. He never talked like that; there was always something that bugged him and made him irritated, but not now. Harry thought he would ask about his behavior later, after he will get all the answers to his questions.

"Draco, why weren't you at the feast?" He continued to investigate.

Draco shrugged. "Didn't feel like it."

"Oh, so you didn't feel like coming to the Halloween feast for the last six years?"

Draco blinked once, looking confused. "What are you talking about?" he asked with the new quiet tone in his voice.

Harry was feeling angry again. He was tired of Draco's mind games. "You know damn well what I'm talking about! Don't lie to me, Draco! Blaise said you've always been avoiding the Halloween feasts, all right? So I think it's about time you'll tell us what's bothering you."

"Yeah, what's going on?" Blaise added.

For a minute, no one spoke. Harry waited for a respond, but Draco just glared at them. He started to doubt Draco wasn't even listening to them. Then, Draco sighed heavily and buried his face in his hands.

He raised his head to look at them and whispered, "All right, I'll tell you." He motioned them to sit, and they sat down on the closest bed and waited for him to speak again.

"It's been fifteen years..." he started, but added no more. Harry was about to open his mouth and urge him to continue, but Draco held up a hand and went on, "Since my father swore he will revenge the Dark Lord's death. How silly is this, hua? It is fifteen years exactly today. It may sound a bit lame, but every year on Halloween, I sit down and pray that he wouldn't do anything to fulfill this promise, which means he's after your parents and godfather," he said to Harry. "Now, I don't know when he will act, but I'm sure he will eventually. And since the Dark Lord was killed on October 31st, I think that's when my father will strike. When exactly? Again, I really don't know. That's why I shut myself out, because I'm concerned about the actions he might take, and I wish he would stay low. Not because I care for his safety, but for you parents'. I care for their lives, Harry, and I don't want you to suffer from losing them. I sent letters to Mother telling her to convince him not to do anything, but nothing is definite. She says he starts to gather power, to rally more unconvicted Death Eaters to join him on his mission. He's certain that's what the Dark Lord would've wanted them to do."

Harry had no chance to respond to that. The door to their room burst open again and two people stood at the entrance. The first, a short boy, Harry saw earlier in the common room. The second was none other than Professor Snape, and he looked livid. Harry never saw him looking more menacing than now.

"Here he is, Professor!" squeaked the second year boy.

"Thank you, McNeil, I can see him perfectly by myself," Snape said coldly. "Potter, come with me to the Headmaster's office this instant!" he ordered.

"Wh... what did I do?" Harry stuttered.

"Like you don't know," the Professor said. Harry exchanged looks with Blaise, who looked as frightened as he was. "Now, Potter! I haven't got all night for you!"

Harry gulped with fear. All he did was trying to put some fun in the school. He got up from the bed and followed Snape up to Dumbledore's office, where he only visited once before, in his first year, when his parents tried to convince him to take a second sorting, to no avail.

"Your parents have been notified, and soon will join us there."

"But, sir, I don't understand," Harry said, confused. "Why do I need to go to the Headmaster's office? I only did it for the laugh."

"Did it for the laugh! I wonder what your parents say when they'll discover their son is a Death Eater. A son of two Aurors, what an outrage..."

"What?" Harry yelled. "How dare y –"

"Fizzing Whizbee," said Snape right then. They reached the stone gargoyle on the second floor. "I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you, Potter; you're already got yourself in enough trouble."

He walked up the spiral staircase, now revealed behind the wall after the gargoyle sprang aside. Harry followed quietly, but was furious inside. How dare Snape call him a Death Eater?

Snape didn't knock on the oak door of Dumbledore's office, but burst in without an invitation. Harry walked in sheepishly.

"Thank you, Severus for kindly bringing here Mr. Potter. Sit down, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly, gesturing one of the chairs in front of his desk. There were three chairs there. Harry guessed the other two will soon be taken by his parents. He sat himself in the middle one.

"Professor, why am I here?" Harry dared to ask Dumbledore.

"Harry, I'm afraid a grave thing happened not long ago, but I cannot tell you more than that, not until your parents will join us. It was difficult and almost impossible to contact them" – Harry's heart skipped a beat at that – "but we found them at the Ministry, after they had received an emergency call from work. They should be here shortly." Harry relaxed again when he knew Lucius Malfoy didn't hurt them and that they were all right. Even though they didn't get along sometimes, he still cared for their safety.

Harry, Dumbledore and Snape waited until his parents will arrive. Neither of them said anything while they waited. Snape stood in the back of the room, looking at Dumbledore's silver instruments. Harry bowed his head, trying not to look at anything particular, and sensing Dumbledore's gaze upon him. Dumbledore looked very amused and he was tapping his fingers on his desk as a distraction, or if it was to get Harry's attention, Harry didn't know. Other than the sound of Dumbledore's fingers tapping on the desk in the same rhythm, there was an owl outside, in the cold night air, and it hooted sleepily.

Professor McGonagall quietly entered the room about five minutes later, accompanied by James and Lily Potter, who looked very concerned. Unsure why, Harry was afraid to look at their eyes, so he kept his head bowed.

"Professor Dumbledore," called McGonagall, causing Dumbledore to look up, as though he haven't notice them come in. He got up from his seat and went to greet Harry's parents with a handshake.

"Albus," James greeted, shaking the old Professor's hand, as did Lily.

From the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Snape wore an ugly sneering look on his face when his parents entered the room. It was no secret he despised them and Sirius ever since their Hogwarts years.

"James, Lily, please sit down," Dumbledore requested.

James and Lily took the vacant seats on either side of Harry's chair. Harry now felt that enough courage was built inside of him to finally look at them. He looked first at his father, sitting on his left, but James did not look back at him, but stared pointedly at Dumbledore. Harry turned to look at his mother, but she now bowed her head and was wringing her hands uncomfortably in her lap. He felt disappointed. His parents weren't even trying to look at him. He wondered what Dumbledore could have possibly told them about him that made them act so uneasy around him.

He couldn't take it anymore. The words just burst out of his mouth. "I'm not a Death Eater!" he cried.

Lily gasped, placing her hand to her mouth and she and James turned to look at him questioningly at once.

"Well, no one said you are, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"He did," Harry said, looking around at Snape. He felt a bit weird talking like that about his Head of House, but Snape started it.

James got up from his seat and walked slowly to Snape, who straightened up. "Here we go again, Snape. One thousand students in this school and you got the nerve to go straight to my son and accuse him without any proof whatsoever. Are we back to being twelve, then? I thought since you became a respectable Professor in this school, you would grow up, but accusing your own House student

of being a Death Eater? My son? You got yourself really low this time."

Snape looked like he was about to pull out his wand and hex James right then and there, but before he could manage it, Dumbledore called. "Gentlemen, please, there is no need to fight. We're here because there's something we all need to solve. No one here is accusing young Harry of anything." James turned around and sat back down.

"Of course not!" said Lily furiously, unconsciously putting her hand on Harry's in a comforting way. The small gesture made him smile. "There is no way in the world my Harry –"

"Lily, dear, I haven't explained anything yet. May I please do it now?" Dumbledore interrupted. Lily nodded. "But first, Severus, Minerva, could you please leave the four of us alone?"

"Certainly," said McGonagall, and she and Snape left the office.

Dumbledore turned to look at the Potters and got straight to the point. "Around the end of the great Halloween feast we had tonight, a spectacular display of fireworks had been made by none other than our Harry. Even if it was without permission, he will not get punished for raising the school spirits. Everyone enjoyed it. It was well planned and I thank Harry for doing so, even if he thought it was meant to be a prank.

"But a few minutes later, Harry and his friend left the feast. Why? I don't know –" Harry was about to explain where he and Blaise went off to, but Dumbledore held up a hand and he went on. "The Head Boy came to me right then, looking utterly horrified and said the Dark Mark had appeared over the castle –" The three Potters all gasped at the sudden news – So we tried to stay calm, in order not to alert the entire school. The staff of teachers and I went outside, and there it was, glittering in green, but it wasn't the usual Dark Mark, it looked a bit different. Professor Flitwick suggested it was another firework, and we indeed saw it disappeared a few seconds later. And that's why we're here right now."

"But I didn't do it. I went back to my dormitory, you can ask –" Harry hurried to explain.

"Harry, I do not think you are responsible for this," Dumbledore said calmly. "Though that's not the reason I called you all here tonight, I do think the firework that was set outside used to belong to you."

Right then, something made sense. "I lost one, in Hogsmeade. Somebody must have taken it. It must have been a student. And it's easy to change the shape it creates, it's says so on the sticker placed on it."

"I agree," said Dumbledore. "A student did it, but whom exactly? This person must be someone who wanted to scare, to warn from something, but my guess is that because this person might be too young to join the Death Eaters, he faked the Mark. Was it on his or hers own accord or under someone's orders, I hope we will soon find out."

"Okay. Then why are we here if Harry isn't guilty? You said there's another issue," said James

"Well, it does link with this incident. I assume that was a sign that something is about to happen, and since we all know what happened fifteen years ago, we should prepare you for the worst."

Harry didn't know if he should mention what Draco just told him about his father. Would Draco want him to tell that? It was quite personal, wasn't it? And it will put his father in Azkaban, and Draco might get in trouble. But then again, it's all his parents ever wanted to do, lock Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban, and if he will not say anything, something unexpected might happen to them.

So what will it be? His parents? Or his best friend?

Thankfully, when Dumbledore spoke again, Harry wasn't in dilemma anymore.

"It is rumored the Death Eaters out there starting to gather power again. I want you two to be careful. If you feel like you have to, go

back into hiding," he said to James and Lily. "And of course, Harry is safe here, that is until the holidays, when Remus will look after him until they will join you."

Of course, Harry thought. I'm also in danger. Voldemort was about to kill me fifteen years ago, and if Lucius Malfoy want to revenge his death, that means, not only Sirius and my parents are in danger, but so am I.

After Dumbledore ended the discussion, Harry once again said goodbye to his parents and returned to his dormitory.

It was way past curfew and everyone was already asleep, and he didn't want to disturb them. He would tell them tomorrow what happened, if they'd ask, and they probably will.

He had troubles sleeping that night. His mind was swirling with images of Lucius Malfoy pointing a wand at his heart and from its tip a streak of green light exploded. He woke up several times that night and checked around the room to make sure the only Malfoy there was his best friend.

When his mind wasn't thinking about his death, dreams of Ginny Weasley occupied it. Sometimes they met in an empty corridor, and she looked at him with disgust or horror, just when he realized he had the Dark Mark tattooed on his hand. And sometimes he was back in Hogsmeade's Main Street and she was bending over him again, but she was laughing at him for giving up a fight for Dean and chickening out.

"I'm not a coward," Harry mumbled in his sleep, when he finally managed to get some.

November finally entered the next day. Harry woke up that morning with puffy eyes, caused from lack of sleep.

He dressed quickly and left the room before any of his roommates could get the chance to ask him what happened last night. He would tell Blaise and Draco when they asked him, but not now, and he was sure to not bring the subject up himself.

When he stepped into the common room, a group of students gathered around the notice board. A new sign has been pinned there, and it said:

How to Prove You're Not A Coward?

Easily! Just join us on this Saturday, November 6th for the new and improved Dueling Club!

All sixth and seventh year students are welcome to come and join!

First to fifth year students are allowed to come and watch.

See you there!

That sign was teasing him. It was like the teachers all knew how he felt at the moment and decided to taunt him. He stayed in his place, staring at the flier, and reading the title a few more times. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't delusional.

He decided to depart the common room quickly before people flooded him with unwanted questions.

"Uh, uh, uh. Not so fast, Potter," said someone from behind, before Harry had managed to escape.

He turned around to see Theodore Nott standing on the other side of the common room with folded arms and raised eyebrows.

"Hurrying somewhere?" Nott asked, sounding interested.

"Just breakfast," Harry replied with a smile. He knew what he wanted, but he was not going to tell him. "I didn't eat much at the feast last night."

"So I've heard. I also heard that –"

"You know Nott, if I cared, I would really want to hear that, but I don't, so go gossip with the rest of the girls, will you?"

And he left, feeling quite satisfied with his answer.

But Theodore didn't let it drop. When he arrived to the Great Hall for breakfast, he seated himself next to Harry. "You know, rumor has it that you, good old Harry Potter finally came around and joined the Dark side," he whispered.

Right then, four other people came to sit in the table around Harry. Draco and Blaise sat across from him, both looking very smug, and Crabbe and Goyle sniggered to themselves as they sat next to them.

"Only in your wet dreams, Nott," replied Harry, smiling despite himself.

"Come on, Harry, what was that scene about last night when Snape came and took you to see Dumbledore?" Blaise asked. "People said something about you conjuring the Dark Mark, perhaps you'd like to go into detail on the subject?"

"Erm – Not right now, I won't."

"Come on, look around, Harry. Everyone knows by now; they're all looking at you."

Harry looked around the Hall. People were indeed casting him suspicious looks, while whispering among themselves, like he didn't see.

"Blaise, I was with you all day yesterday. When could I possibly find time to go outside and conjure the Dark Mark?"

"Technically, you weren't with me all day yesterday," Blaise corrected.

"Oh, yeah? Well, if I joined the Dark side, then so did you," Harry said, leaning back in his seat and folding his arms.

"What's that suppose to mean? You know I don't –"

Harry didn't care anymore that Nott, Crabbe and Goyle, and probably the whole Slytherin House and all the people around would hear it; he had to say it.

"Relax, Blaise. All I mean is that the Mark was only a firework someone, who's not me, set off; it wasn't the real Mark. That's why I was sent to see Dumbledore. He thought – No, Snape thought I owned it. That's why you are just as bad as I am."

"I – hua –" Blaise stuttered, perplexed.

"I know," Harry smiled. "Now, pass me that coffee pot, will you? I don't want to fall asleep in class."

"I had no idea, okay? Now, leave me alone, Ron, or I'll Bat-Bogey hex you!" Ginny shouted, storming out of Gryffindor Tower. She tried to slam the portrait of the Fat Lady on Ron as he managed to get out. The Fat Lady cried out, but Ginny did not care. Ron, however, tried to apologize for his sister's behavior, and then set off again and ran after her, not paying much attention to Ginny's threats.

"I swear Ginny, if I catch you around this guy one more time, I'll owl Mum and you'll be back at the Burrow, weeping, when Errol will be the only one who will listen to you sob! – And that is when he's not passed out!"

"I said okay, didn't I?" she said angrily. "The last thing I need right now is a Death Eater in my life!"

"Good. Because you won't talk to him, or mention his name again, and if I catch you even trying to look at his direction – I mean, that's it! It's over!"

"All right, I got it! Now shove off!"

She quickly snuck into the girls' bathroom, somewhere she could stay away from Ron. And Ron, without any choices left, had to stay outside and wait for her to come out, so he could keep nagging her about that topic.

Hermione then came over. "Well?" she asked. Ron shrugged helplessly. "You know, I don't really think he's done it..."

"Don't you take his side, Hermione!"

"I'm not. I'm just saying it's not something he would likely do."

"Oh, that right, I forgot. You know him so well!" Ron said sarcastically, and Hermione rolled her eyes. "That Slytherin – Death Eater – bastard – GIT!" Ron suddenly bellowed, and made a group of girls, who just left the bathroom, to scream. "Sorry," he said, embarrassed.

"Ron, don't work yourself up like that. She's fine. She told you she's fine hundreds of times this morning. You're too protective over her. She can protect herself very well. She's a very strong witch."

Ron ignored her and slightly pushed open the bathroom door and peeked inside. There was no sign for Ginny, and the room was silence. If she was crying, he would hear her.

"I can't see her," Ron whined

"Oh, I'm sure nothing happened to her. What will she do, drown herself in the toilet? Jump out of the window? She's too short, Ron. And besides, she's sane," Hermione said.

"She's definitely not sane when she's around that Potter bloke!" Ron argued, peeking inside the bathroom again.

"If you really want to know, she already left."

"What? When?" Ron looked surprised.

"Around the time you yelled 'git'. I saw her leave with all the girls."

"Great, then why am I here, peeking inside the girls' bathroom and missing breakfast? I'm starving!" Ron said, striding to the Great Hall.

"Well, it was quite funny when people shot you weird glances and thought that the Gryffindor Prefect is a pervert!" she giggled.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled, and that made her only laugh harder. But unfortunately for him, Ron couldn't find his appetite once he arrived to the Great Hall. No matter how loudly his stomach grumbled, he kept stabbing his toast with his fork, but did not eat it. He couldn't take his eyes off Harry Potter, who was sitting over at the Slytherin table, laughing with his friends.

"All right, STOP!" Hermione said, taking away his fork. "You'll make a hole in the plate eventually!"

"Look at him! What's so funny? When was it said that serving an evil deadwizard can be a hoot?"

"Stop thinking about it, Ron, you're driving me crazy with all these rambling."

"No, see what bugs me, even when people found out what he is, he wasn't expelled from school. I bet just from the grin on his face he didn't even receive detention! And look at him; he always has to be the centre of attention! Thinking he has such influence on people. Maybe he Imperiused Snape and Dumbledore, or Obliviated them, so he came out of this innocent. I bet there isn't one innocent thought in his mind," he complained.

"Ron!" Ginny barked. "Come off it, will you? Hermione, I don't know how you can stand him!"

"Shut it, Ginny! You stay out of it," warned Ron. "Why are you all pissed off today, anyway?"

"Didn't Hermione tell you?" She looked expectantly at Hermione. Ron followed her gaze and looked at Hermione confused.

"Oh, right. Sorry, it slipped my mind!" Hermione said and banged her hand to her forehead. "Umm, Ginny and Dean broke up yesterday."

"You did?" Ron asked, looking back at his sister.

"Yep. We had this huge fight and it wasn't working anyway, and he was so irritating, so I broke it off."

"Thank god!" Ron sighed and leaned back in his chair. He caught Ginny and Hermione's confused and furious looks and quickly added, "Er – I mean, he wasn't good for you. I told you from the very beginning not to go out with him. I know the bloke and he didn't seem serious with you. I told you I'm not approving –"

"You're not approving anybody," Ginny snapped, standing up from her seat and getting ready to leave.

"Well – that's... that's because I care for you!"

"Sure Ron. You care for me, so you decided to run my life for me. You tell me where to go, what to do, who to date – Sorry, I meant who not to date, and who I can't talk about or look at! Well, you know what? I'm sick of it! I'm only one year younger than you! I'm a Prefect and I'm a grown up person! Mum doesn't even tell me what to do anymore, so why are you?"

"Because someone has to put some discipline in you!" Ron retorted.

"You say it like I'm a rebel, like I don't listen to anything you or other people say to me, and that's not true! I don't need you to make my decisions, Ron! If you really care for me, how about the next time I'll date someone, you won't say anything and just accept my choice?"

"No way!" he protested, but just then Hermione hit his stomach with her elbow under the table. "Oww! What the hell was that for?" He looked at Hermione and she just raised her eyebrows at him, hinting something. "Oh, all right, fine," he finally told Ginny, while rubbing the side of his stomach.

The anger on Ginny's face was replaced by a smile. "Really?" she asked, half believing what she heard was true.

"Yes, but as long as it's not that Death Eater Potter!"

Ginny seemed to consider it for a second before she smiled again. "Fine," she said and she took off.

"She'll find a loophole in this agreement, I know it," muttered Ron, taking a bite off his toast without even noticing. Harry disappeared from the Hall and it was time he will eat something.

"Maybe," Hermione said. "But remember, you promised you will stay out of her love life. Let her be. If she was to make a mistake, let her suffer alone, don't make that mistake for her. She needs to learn how to deal with life. Now come on, grab a last bite of toast because we have Transfiguration now."

Harry remembered he forgot his Transfiguration book back in his dormitory. Once he got it, he left the dungeons without hurry, even though the bell just rang, and he knew McGonagall would take points from him even if he was being late by one minute because she always was there before the bell rang. So he took his time.

There were a few people around him who hurried to get in time for their lesson, probably with Snape, as they turned the corner leading to the Potions classroom. Soon, the corridor was deserted again; the only person walking there was him, though not a minute later, he heard footsteps again.

As he was about to take the stairs leading back to the entrance hall, the girl who just descended them was now standing in front of him. He took a quick look at her. Her red hair was resting on her shoulders, and her slim hands holding her books securely to the front of her body. He couldn't believe how odd these coincidences had become.

"Excuse me," she said, trying to move past him, not even registering who he was, as she was in hurry.

Harry instinctively grabbed her arm to stop her from going any further. Her books fell to her feet and she stiffened at his touch. "Hold on," he said.

Her legs froze, her breath choked and her heart beats seemed to stop when she heard his voice. She gulped with difficulty, and all she wanted right then was to dash away from him as fast as possible.

She tried to jerk her arm from his hand, but he held her tight, so she gave up, but did not turn to look at him. "I – Um..." she began, trying to find the right thing to say, but her mouth was dry and she couldn't form whole words.

Still holding her arm so she won't run away, which he knew she would the second he will let her go, he said, "Tell him I'll meet him on Saturday at the Dueling Club."

"Tell who?" she asked, still not making eye-contact with him.

"Your git of a boyfriend, Mr. Thomas. Tell him to come if he's not afraid," he said coldly, reminding himself of the way Snape usually talked. Must be a Slytherin thing, he thought.

"I'm sorry, I cannot do that," she said with a hoarse voice.

"And why's that?" He finally tilted his head to the side to get a glimpse of her red hair.

"Can you please let me go?" she said, obviously wishing to change the subject. "The bell rang five minutes ago; I'm really late for Potions."

"So? You're a Prefect –"

"That doesn't mean I'm allowed to be late for class. And besides, I want to be there on time, but because of you –"

She tried again to get away from his grip, but did not succeed. "Please let me go," she begged, her voice a bit shaky. "Please!"

She finally looked up at him. Her look in her eyes was pleading, scared. Here they were in an empty corridor, alone, just like in his dream. She looked at him fearfully because he was a... but he wasn't a Death Eater.

"You're not afraid of me, are you?" he asked with a frown, though he knew she really was. There was no other way to look at this situation differently. As he understood what he's done, he quickly let go of her

arm, and just like he predicted, she quickly bent down to gather her books. "I'm not what you think I am."

She slowly rose from the floor and looked at his eyes again. She didn't have to say anything, he already knew.

Nodding once to her, he backed away from her and went up the stairs, thinking all the way to class, that somehow he must prove her he wasn't guilty.

A/N: Okay, so what do you think? I'm still not sure about how long it'll take for them to stay like this, but I reckon not too long. You all must remember: Patience is the key word!

Now, don't be lazy and shy. Please review this chapter. It's the longest one yet, and it was difficult to write (and revise, since I needed to think of something different than the one I had before). I hope you like this more. Thank you for reading and for your patience.

Chapter 11 – Secrets:

Five minutes later, Harry was sitting next to Draco in Transfiguration, smiling broadly despite himself. And why wouldn't he? As he took his seat, just behind Weasley's and Granger's table, he heard the most amusing thing whispered to Hermione by Ron, something that sounded a lot like: "Looks like he Imperiused McGonagall, too, otherwise she would have turned him into a rat and wouldn't take 10 points from Slytherin! He was fifteen minutes late and you saw how he entered the class, like he owned the damn place!"

Too bad Hermione was too concentrated copying notes from the blackboard, like McGonagall asked them to, and ignored him completely.

Harry was practically enjoying seeing Weasley driving himself mad like that. It was also really funny that whenever McGonagall turned her back to the class, Harry was throwing small paper balls at Ron from behind. He and Draco tried their best to suppress their laughs as Harry kept doing it until Ron finally got really pissed and couldn't ignore them any longer. He turned around to glare at them, very red-faced, and gave Harry the nastiest look he could manage at the moment.

Harry, then, seized the opportunity. With a fake yawn, he stretched out his right hand, purposely letting his sleeve slide down, and revealed his forearm. Ron fearfully glanced up at his exposed skin. No Dark Mark was burned upon Harry's flesh, like he had thought. Harry knew it wasn't very convincing since the Death Eaters had the Mark on their left forearm, and right now, his left hand was still hidden under the plaster cast. However, Ron didn't seem to know this little fact, and he just continued to gape at Harry in disbelief. How thick is he? Harry thought.

"Weasley, didn't your mother ever told you it's not polite to stare?" Draco asked quietly, enjoying the plan Harry came up with. Ron turned to look at him, putting his fuming look back on his face.

"Leave him alone, Draco. I don't have time to use the Cruciatus Curse on him after class," Harry commented seriously.

"Then perhaps after dinner?" Draco suggested, playing along. Ron made a soft whimpering noise and gulped with difficulty.

"Um, no, sorry. I already have plans after dinner to kill a first year Hufflepuff. You see, he thought it would be okay to run into me and then walk off after saying a simple 'sorry'. Well, you know I don't take a simple 'sorry' as an apology..."

"Certainly not," Draco said, shaking his head. "That prat! So, what are you going to do to him?"

"I think I'll start with —" Harry began to say, but was cut off by McGonagall.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy!" she called warningly. Ron immediately turned back to his table.

"I guess we'll have to take care of Weasley some other time, then," Draco whispered, but loud enough for Ron to hear him.

"Yeah," Harry whispered back. "Guess I'll have to take off this cast first. I'll need both of my hands to strangle him, then I'll stun him so he won't scream when I'll use the Cruciatus on him. How does that sound like?"

"Brilliant," Draco said, but then he caught another suspicious look from McGonagall and they got back to copy notes from the blackboard. After a moment, when it was safe enough, he whispered quietly so only Harry would hear him this time. "When are you really going to take that off?" He indicated the plaster cast on Harry's left hand.

"I don't know. It itches now, so I guess it healed. And I don't feel any pain in my shoulder anymore. I know it's been only two days, but I'm really sick of it. It was very tiring sleeping on my right side for couple of nights in a row. Maybe I'll step by the Hospital Wing later and see if I can take it off."

When Harry looked up again he saw Hermione comforting a very harassed-looking Ron, and he smiled to himself in satisfaction. That will teach Weasley not to talk like that about me behind my back.

"Oh, come off it, Ron. You don't really believe they were serious, do you?" Hermione said on their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts. "They were just trying to scare you for the fun. Just don't let them get to you."

"They were serious, Hermione! Potter said he'll kill a Hufflepuff kid tonight, after dinner!" Ron argued.

"Oh, and you believe him? Tell me Ron, is there a logical explanation why he would talk about killing someone when he knows you're hearing him and you could get him caught?"

"To show me he is really going to finish me off!"

"Oh, that's a load of rubbish!" she huffed.

Not so far from there, three Slytherins were walking out from the Hospital Wing to the same class. Blaise looked at Harry annoyed, while Draco rolled his eyes at his two friends.

"No, I will not let you copy my notes, Harry!" Blaise said firmly, holding tight to his school bag, so Harry won't try to snatch it again, while he also bragged he could use his left hand again to do so. "You should've listened in class and not fool around with Weasley! Luckily, I chose to sit next to a quiet Ravenclaw, or else I would have ended up like you two, chasing after some sucker to do all the hard work for you. I'm not going to be that sucker, Harry. Not again, anyway," he added quietly.

"Fool around with Weasley! That was a good one!" Draco chuckled. Harry cast him a dark look, but turned back to Blaise with disgust.

"Ugh, the way you said it sounded like you were implying something!" he said with a shudder.

"Well, maybe I'm not talking about this particular Weasley, if you know what I mean..." Blaise replied with a knowing tone in his voice.

Harry rolled his eyes and Draco spoke again. "Funny, I remember him saying something like he's starting to let go of her, and that she's not his type."

"Yeah, right!" Blaise snorted. "You should have seen him at Hogsmeade. After he got stunned by Thomas, I saw him waking up in her lap."

Draco quickly caught on and changed the subject. "Wait a minute – He got stunned by Thomas? As Dean Thomas? Dark bloke, Gryffindor, Mudblood?" he said incredulously.

Blaise nodded. "That's the one."

Draco started to laugh his head off. Harry began to feel his anger rise. He didn't expect such behavior from Draco, and he wished that for once, Blaise would have kept his mouth shut.

"Could you stop talking about me like I'm not here?" Harry said crossly.

"All right, all right. I'm going to the lavatory, I'll see you later," Draco said. "And Blaise, tell Harry when you see him that I was stunned to hear such shocking news that he couldn't overcome a Mudblood," he added as he walked off.

Blaise chuckled at the comment, but stopped when he saw Harry looking at him grumpily. "Sorry," he said apologetically.

After a few seconds of silence between them, Harry saw Blaise looking around nervously. "Checking for Pansy?" he said amusingly.

"No," Blaise replied seriously. He held Harry by the shoulder and stopped him from walking. "I need to tell you something before he gets back."

"What is it?" Harry whispered, unsure why, since no one was around.

"I remembered it this morning, but I couldn't tell you when he was around. Guess who I saw entering the Hog's Head yesterday?" Blaise said. Harry shrugged. "Draco's father."

"Lucius Malfoy?" Harry asked in dismay. His face fell at Blaise's nod and he could feel his heart racing. "Wh...What was he doing there?"

"I don't know, but he looked suspicious, if you ask me. I think he saw me, but I'm not quite sure. I was talking to Pansy at the moment, so I guess he might have missed me. Listen, don't tell Draco I told you that, he will be all moody again, all right?"

"All right," he said sincerely, and they continued walking to their class. Harry was wondering what Lucius Malfoy could have done in Hogsmeade, especially in the Hog's Head, a bar that didn't exactly matching his social level. He was starting to get worried. Lucius Malfoy was so close to him that day, which also happened to be the 15th anniversary of Voldemort's fall. Was it just a coincidence?

"Are you okay? You seem quiet all of the sudden," Blaise commented.

"No, I'm fine, just thinking," Harry said quietly. He forced himself to forget about what bothered him right now and looked amused again. "Say... about Pansy. You guys hit it off?"

Blaise's face flushed. It was rather rare to see Blaise blushing, even if he was a bit shy sometimes, but ever since he started to like Pansy, he used to blush almost every time their names were mentioned in the same sentence. "It was okay," he mumbled.

"Did you ask her out?"

"I didn't have time to," he said, looking uneasy with the subject. "I heard what happened to you and I came right away to check."

"You're an idiot," Harry said. Blaise gaped at him. "Well, you could've forgotten about me, and done something about yourself for a change. I was fine if you haven't noticed."

"I'm not the idiot around here, you are. When are you going to ask out the red-head? Stop chasing her around and get to the point."

"Mind your business, will you?" Harry spat. "I have no intention in asking her out."

"Right, so you just kissed her, and wooed after her for weeks now, and you're not interested in her at all?"

"'Wooed her'? I can't believe that just came out of your mouth! And yes, I'm not interested in her. She's Weasel's sister, and Thomas' girlfriend."

"I don't believe you," Blaise said, and caused Harry to sigh with annoyance. "If what you're afraid of is mine and Draco's reaction, then don't worry about it, we won't mind. Just get over your denial and define what you're feeling towards her, because it looks bad when you're walking after her like a lost puppy."

"Oh, shut up!" Harry snapped, and finally they entered the class, and after that, they didn't speak about this subject again. Ten minutes before the lesson was over, Professor Lupin asked everyone to put down their quills (as they did some theoretical studying lately) and got their full attention.

"I'm sure you all have seen the signs about the new Dueling Club that taking place this Saturday." Everyone nodded, and Lupin began to pace around the class. "A few students approached me with questions before the class started, so I wanted to clarify what you will be facing there: You'll be paired with someone from a different House. You won't get a chance to pick your opponent, since the selection will be randomly. It won't be like the Dueling Club you had in your second year. Hopefully, it will be more experienced, more challenging, and more difficult. You won't be asked to disarm your opponents, but to attack them —" A series of confused whispers interrupted his speech, and Lupin hurried to explain more. "Of course you'll be protected, so you won't get seriously hurt. I'm saying 'seriously hurt' because you can get hurt if a spell was to hit you. So you ask yourselves what is the purpose? If no one can get hurt, how do you call who won? Well, the purpose of the dueling is to see who knows how to avoid spells,

and how to counter-attack. It will be simply just spells we practiced throughout your last six years here, nothing dark and dangerous. And, the first person who has the least ability to attack back is the loser. Any more questions?"

A Hufflepuff girl raised her hand. "Yes sir. The sign didn't say where the Club will be held."

Lupin nodded slightly. "Yes, that is because it isn't settled yet. I shall tell you the exact location and time by our next lesson on Thursday. Right now, the Headmaster and I are debating whether it will be in the Great Hall or somewhere else – Right, Miss Granger?" Lupin gestured to Hermione's hand.

"Professor, is there a chance we'll be dueling with a seventh year student?" she asked excitedly.

"No, I'm afraid not. Seventh year students are might be just one year ahead of you, but they are more experienced, and their classes are slightly more advanced." Granger looked a little disappointed with his answer.

The bell just rang and everyone headed to the door, in order to get down for lunch. "We'll talk about it more on Thursday," Lupin called before they all left the classroom.

"Harry, are you coming?" Blaise and Draco asked together, when they saw that Harry stayed behind.

"Go without me, I'll catch with you later," he said. When they left and only he and Professor Lupin were left in the class, Harry walked towards him.

"Hello Harry, is there something I can do for you?" Lupin asked, just noticing he was there.

"Yes. I need your help."

A few minutes later, after Harry finished explaining everything to Lupin, silence fell between them, in which, each of them thought to

himself for a moment about what Harry just requested. Harry felt a bit awkward asking for Lupin's help. He never asked for anyone's help before because he never needed it. He always did things by himself, but this time was different, this time he really needed someone to help him.

"I don't know, Harry," Lupin sighed and looked worried.

"Please, Professor. It's really important to me. I wouldn't have asked for your help if it wasn't."

"Do your parents know about this?"

"No, at least I don't think they do. And please, Remus, they can't know. They have enough on their minds right now!" Harry pleaded again.

Lupin smiled feebly at something Harry just said. It was the first time in years, maybe ever since Harry had attended Hogwarts six years ago, that he called him by his first name. It wasn't 'Professor' or just 'Lupin', it was simply 'Remus'. Without knowing that what might have been just a simple slip of the tongue, touched his heart. Lupin thought to himself it meant that Harry wasn't all closed up inside like he thought, but kept within himself a soft side that no one yet had the chance to break through. Maybe now he succeeded to make a small crack.

"All right, I'll help you," he said and watched Harry's face lit into a wide grin.

"You will?" Harry asked, almost not believing his ears.

"Yes, I will. Meet me here tonight after dinner. I'll see then what I can do for you."

On the afternoon, Ginny was trying to study in the common room for a Defense Against the Dark Arts exam she had on Friday, but couldn't concentrate. It was hard enough to put up with Ron and Hermione bickering over nothing again, but it wasn't what made her mind wander with her thoughts.

Before Ron came over, she and Hermione had a conversation she couldn't get out of her mind right now.

Flashback:

Ginny sat in that same armchair only 20 minutes ago, trying to think of something that she had just been asked by Dean, when the portrait hole opened, and Hermione climbed into the common room and sat next to her.

"Hey Ginny. Have you seen Ron?" she asked. Ginny shook her head absently, still thinking to herself and not paying much attention to her friend.

"We said we'd meet in the library, but I guess he blew me off. Honestly, I don't know how he managed to achieve eight O.W.L.S if he's hardly studying!" Hermione ranted.

Ginny did not reply, which made Hermione a bit suspicious. "Are you all right, Ginny?" she asked.

"What?" Ginny said, finally snapping out of her thoughts. "Oh, I'm fine. Dean just came over, and tried to convince me to give him another chance. I was just wondering if I did the right thing, breaking up with him, I mean."

"You want to get back together with him? I thought you said he was getting on your nerves?"

"He does, but... I don't know..." her voice trailed off. "I've almost accepted, but then I told him I would have to think about it."

"Maybe you should think this through before you decide anything? Or maybe you should start over?" Hermione suggested. "If you really can't stand Dean, there's no reason why you should take him back. Why don't you go for someone who's different than him? Someone like Neville for an instance! Neville is really nice, and I heard he really fancies you!" she said encouragingly.

"Neville? Really?" Ginny grimaced. "But I don't like Neville. I mean, I like him, but not like that. And there's no way in the world I would date

him! It was bad enough going with him to the Yule Ball. He always stepped on my toes while we danced. That's why I ran from there and met Michael."

At the thought of Michael, Ginny couldn't suppress a groan, and covered her face in her hands. "God! Do I really have that rubbish taste in guys?"

"No, of course not. I'm dating your brother, am I not?" Hermione joked and they both chuckled. "Maybe you just haven't met the right one, yet," Hermione said soothingly.

Ginny looked into blank space again. Hermione was always helpful with such sort of things, and maybe she was right. Maybe she shouldn't get back together with Dean and should move on. Maybe Neville is the one for her? 'No, snap out of it, Weasley! You're hallucinating!' she told herself. Hermione's voice got her attention once more.

"I know there is one guy who's really right for you. I mean, just by looking at him, I can tell that you'll be right for each other," she said.

Ginny shifted in her armchair to a more comfortable position, interested to hear more. "Who's he?" she asked eagerly. "Do I know him?"

"Oh, you definitely know him. Let's see, you two love Quidditch. You, hate studying, yet achieve great grades, and both are too stubborn to admit what you have feeling for each other. Maybe you have met the right guy, but you just haven't given him a chance?"

Now it was as clear as glass. Ginny knew who she was taking about, and she had no passion talking about him. It will only upset her, anyway. "Hermione..." Ginny sighed heavily, wishing to drop the subject.

"Ginny, I saw the whole thing from the Three Broomsticks. I was there, remember? And you can't fool me about what I saw –"

"What you saw was Dean stunning him, and then me waking him up because I wanted to be nice, that's all! End of story."

"Was it really just that?" Hermione asked quietly, leaning over and looking at her closely.

Ginny avoided her look, but somehow it made her feel like it was burning her skin, and she couldn't get away from it anymore. "Yes," she said firmly, looking up again. Hermione arched an eyebrow and Ginny knew she couldn't avoid her knowing look anymore. It was enough lying to herself, but to someone who wanted to help her? She sighed again. "No, but It's not that simple. He was there, lying on the ground, unarmed, and I couldn't help myself but feel a bit sorry for him, and mad at Dean for doing this to him when all he tried to do was help me. I don't know why I felt like that. Maybe it was because he wanted to protect me, or the way he acted all heroic and caring for my sake. I tried to think how he would have treated me, and how would it be if I was walking with him to Hogsmeade and not with Dean."

"How would it be?"

"I don't know yet. It's still all blurry to me. I don't even know if it ever clear up, what with all that Death Eater business."

"Do you really think he could be a Death Eater?" Hermione asked.

"I would think so as long as I don't have a proof that he's not."

End of Flashback.

"You are so immature, Ronald Weasley!" Hermione shouted.

Ginny found herself back in the present, where Ron and Hermione were still fighting. Ron was making lame excuses to why he went down to the Quidditch pitch to fly with couple of friends instead of meeting Hermione in the library. Hermione looked livid, her face red like she was holding her breath to stop herself from shouting even louder at him. She looked like she was about to explode.

Ginny couldn't take it anymore.

"For god's sake! I don't know why you call yourselves a couple! All you do is arguing! Why don't you lock yourselves inside a broom cupboard and snog for a change, so some of us could actually study?" she snarled.

Ron and Hermione, who apparently forgot Ginny was sitting close to them, stared at her in surprise. She said no more, and gathered all her books and fled to the library before they started another row while she was still there.

Harry didn't want to fill Draco and Blaise in what he asked from Lupin. Whether it would interest, amuse or bore them, he wasn't sure. It was a private conversation either way, and he wasn't sure he would tell them about it at all.

So he stayed quiet all during the day, careful not to let it slip out, even though his insides were screaming to get this out, because he almost never kept a secret from his friends. He always told them everything, but this time he had to draw a line. He wanted to keep it for himself for a change, just to be safe.

His excuse for not walking with them back to the dungeons right after dinner was rather lame, but yet somewhat true. Even though he wasn't really going to do it now, he told them he was going to talk to the Ravenclaw's Quidditch team Captain about the match they're having right after the holiday break. Now, however, he was going to meet with Lupin. He would talk to the Ravenclaw's Captain sometime tomorrow morning instead.

He wasn't sure if they bought it or not, but was pretty certain they would eventually ask him where he was when he'll be back in a few hours and not right away. He shook all those thoughts out of his mind and hurried to Professor's Lupin office. When he got there, the door was already slightly ajar, waiting for him to push it and come inside. He hesitated whether he should knock on the door or just come in without Lupin's invitation.

He finally decided to knock before entering. When there wasn't any answer, he peeked into the room. It was empty, so he let himself enter the Professor's office, thinking there was no point staying in the

hall. Though he had visited this office several times before, Harry never took a good look at it. Seeing he had some time now, he took a look around. At the very end of the room was a desk, dusty, and full of paperwork, dried quills and empty goblets. The shelves hanging on the walls were mostly packed with books. On a long wooden cabinet under the window on the right sat a few tanks and cages, each one held a different dark creature Harry remembered they'd studied a few years ago.

Right when he ran his hand over the cool glass of a snake's tank, completely fascinated by the creature, Harry was startled by a voice.

"I thought you'll be here by now."

Harry turned around. Professor Lupin was standing at the door, holding a tray with two empty mugs and a steaming kettle. In the dim light of the room, his features looked more apparent, making him look a few years older than he actually was.

"Professor," Harry said, a bit nervous about entering his office without permission. "I didn't mean to intrude —"

Lupin waved his free hand dismissively. "No need apologizing, Harry. You're not intruding at all. I have invited you here tonight, have I not?" He walked into the room and stopped by a small, rounded coffee table that sat near two patchy armchairs by the burning hearth. "I left the door open for you on purpose so you will come in, while I went down to the kitchens to bring us some tea. I thought it would be nice to enjoy it while we sit and discuss what we are going to do before we actually begin."

He settled the tray down on the table, seated himself in one of the armchairs, which emitted a small cloud of dust in the contact with a faint 'poof' sound, and poured the hot tea into the mugs. "You are more than welcome to sit down and join me," he offered. Harry vaguely nodded and made his way to the free armchair, and accepted his mug from Lupin.

"You know, there are some very enthusiastic house elves down there in the kitchens. I almost came back with a cart full of biscuits and

cupcakes," he chuckled quietly. Harry's mouth bore a small smile. "They looked terribly depressed when I had to refused to their generous offer, because I was full from tonight's dinner you see, but it turned out it was their huge, prominent eyes that misled me."

Harry snorted on his tea. He knew how house elves normally looked and acted when they were treated nice and fairly, since they once had one when he about five. Though he didn't remember how he was called, he remembered that his dad brought him home one rainy day from work. They kept him for a while, until his dad had to give him back for whatever reason, he couldn't remember. He could still feel how sad he felt when he was gone, but what would you expect from a five year old boy, who thought the house elf was his pet or a family member by himself?

"Anyways, why don't you tell me what we're really doing here?" Lupin said suddenly. Harry realized they had been sitting there quietly, drinking on their tea, for a few short minutes, without saying a word to each other.

Harry thought whether to tell the actual truth or come up with an alternative reason. He hadn't given Lupin a satisfactory answer why he wanted to do this, and he knew he will have to tell the truth sooner or later, if he wanted his full help. He couldn't avoid this anymore. Lupin would not help him if he didn't get a satisfactory answer.

"Why," Lupin went on, "are you so interested to enrich your knowledge in the subject? It seemed to me like it is extremely important to you to know more than you already do. Why couldn't you just open a book and learn it by yourself?"

Harry swallowed. Without thinking, some sort of an explanation escaped his mouth. "Is it wrong to think about the future? To be prepared for something that is bigger than what we can face here at Hogwarts?"

"Of course there's nothing wrong with that," Lupin hurried to reply. "I was just interested to know what your full intention is. Why do you really need my help, Harry? Does it have something to do with the Dueling Club?"

"A bit, yeah," Harry said. "Look, if I tell you something, do you promise you won't laugh at me or tell anyone?"

Lupin stared at him for a moment and then seriously said, "Go on."

"I want," Harry started, thinking how exactly to phrase what he wanted to say so it won't sound silly. "I want to... look good at the Dueling Club."

"Ah, I see," Lupin said slowly. "And by looking good, you want to learn some more spells that could help you win your opponent, and also can help you in the future?" Harry nodded. "Well, I don't mind helping you learn more things that will help you in the future, but as for the Dueling Club, I think we can put it under the 'cheating category', won't we? The purpose of this Dueling Club is to see what exactly you learned during your six years here, and if you get extra help from me, your Professor, it'd be exactly like cheating. Everyone is going to use their basic knowledge, not something they learned in less than a week just to show off."

"Well, I understand that, I do, but I still want to do this. It has nothing to do with showing off. Look, if you won't help me –"

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying that we can find other solutions."

"Well, what if it isn't just about the Dueling Club? What if it is more a personal issue that I can't exactly tell you about?"

Lupin's brows furrowed. "Why can't you tell me? If you're in trouble, Harry –"

"I'm not," Harry cut him off. "I just – I can't tell you for now. I need to know that you're going to help me with this. Like you said, you're my professor, and as my professor, you suppose to teach me."

There was a long moment of silent. Neither of them spoke. Harry watched Lupin's eyes dart from side to side, as though he was reading, and knew that he was thinking what he should do. Finally, Lupin looked up at Harry and said, "All right, I'll teach you."

"Thank you," Harry said with a small trace of smile on his lips.

"You're not aiming for someone in particular, are you Harry?" Lupin suddenly asked. Harry didn't expect that question. After a long pause in which his mind was racing with possible excuses, he finally managed to stammer out a 'no'.

"Okay, then," Lupin said, putting his now empty mug back on the table and getting up from his seat. "Get up. We will start with something small for tonight."

Harry did as he was told. Lupin instructed him to pull out his wand and stand right in front of him. They went through some basic things and simple spells that Harry already knew, but was glad they did, as he found he forgot a little bit of this and a little bit of that, from lack of using those spells over the years. He accidentally blasted an empty wine bottle that sat on the desk, which made him to groan in frustration and Lupin to chuckle, obviously amused.

"That okay, Harry. I think you've done your share for tonight," Lupin said after the second time Harry blew up the repaired bottle. Harry rubbed his temples in small circles, trying to get rid of an uncontrollable headache that was currently forming. "You are probably tired. Let's call it off for tonight. We'll meet here again tomorrow, at the same time, yes?"

"All right," Harry said in a worn out voice.

"I didn't think there's much to teach you that we already been though in class years ago, but I guess I was wrong. If there is something in particular that you would like to learn, look it up first. Go to the library and search for something that is not so difficult to learn in less than a week."

"Okay," he said. "I better hurry back to my dormitory, before Filch will catch me wandering in the hallways in this late hour of the night. It's way past curfew."

"Right. Good night and good luck!" Lupin called before Harry closed the door of his office and walked down to the dungeons. He fell asleep at once when he collapsed on his bed, not even bothering to change his clothes.

For the next few days, Harry had to bear the unwanted questions from his friends, asking where he went every night after dinner. In addition to that, no one seemed to believe that he wasn't a Death Eater. He had to tolerate people staring at him and whispering to themselves every time he went past them. He was getting really pissed off and tired of this, and wished it would die down soon.

He hadn't seen or heard from Ginny in days. The last time he saw her was their encounter in the dungeons. It was frustrating knowing that she was scared of him, of how the rumors made him into something he wasn't. He found that he was missing her presence around him. Not seeing her every day was like having something missing from his agenda. Sometimes he was feeling rather sorry that he didn't wait and listen to what she had to say that day in Hogsmeade, instead of just taking off.

Remembering that day in Hogsmeade, Harry also remembered what he was preparing for, for the past few days. His mission was to avenge what Dean did to him. He learned a few tricks and new spells from a couple of books he found in the library, and with Lupin's help, he practiced more than he needed to defeat Dean. No one would call him a coward after the Dueling Club, he promised himself.

Only one problem was in his way: How to get Dean as his opponent. That, he had to ask from Lupin, he knew. There wasn't any other way.

"Is there a chance you'll be letting me pick my own opponent, sir?" Harry asked innocently on Wednesday night, after they'd practiced a few more spells.

"Like I already said in class on Monday, Harry, the selection will be random. You don't get to pick who you duel," Lupin explained.

"How exactly does the selection work?" Harry pressed on.

"Isn't it enough that I help you get ready and learn more spells? Do you really need to know that?" Lupin asked, surely suspecting something.

"I just don't want to be stuck with someone who is rubbish. I want a challenge, someone I know I can defeat, but not so easily," Harry said.

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Yes, and I want to see how hard it will be to duel with him."

Lupin looked at Harry for a moment. "How do you know it'd be hard? How do you know this person isn't a dreadful dueler?"

"Because I tasted his power once," Harry said, the words floating out of his mouth without thinking through. "I want to try him again."

"What do you really want from him, Harry? You said you're not aiming for anyone in particular," Lupin said, watching Harry very closely.

"I'm not. I don't want anything from him. It's nothing personal, I swear," Harry said defensively. "Just the challenge."

"Okay," Lupin said slowly, almost like he didn't believe Harry (which he had a good reason not to, because Harry was lying). "I tell you what. You tell me his name then I'll do my best so you two will be each other's opponents."

"You will? You promise?" Harry asked. Lupin nodded. "Well, if so, then it's Dean Thomas, from Gryffindor."

"Very well," Lupin said calmly. "Well, that's it for tonight, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow morning in class."

Harry was leaving the office with a satisfied grin on his face. His plan was going along really well so far. The last part of it will take place on Saturday.

Remus Lupin, on the other hand, was staring blankly into the flames, dancing happily in the fireplace. His mind was somewhere else; worried that he might have made a mistake. Harry was acting weird, he noticed. He could sense he was lying about something, but what exactly? He told him so many things and reasons, that he didn't know which one of them was a lie, if not all of them. He knew he shouldn't have helped him, but he just couldn't turn him down. And now he had to keep his concerns for himself, because he promised Harry he wouldn't tell it to his parents, but was it a smart decision?

"I hope you're not going to do something stupid, Harry."

A/N: Well, that's the chapter. Again, don't think it took me this long to write this short one, I already said there is a second part (a bit longer), which will come soon, and I started to write chapter 13 as well.

So I'd like to get your reviews now, because they make me so happy!
Thanks for reading.

Chapter 12 – Dueling:

"So you've been a bit mysterious lately," stated Blaise the next morning. They were heading for Defense Against the Dark Arts once again. Harry didn't say much to them all during breakfast. He looked incredibly tired; his eyes were bloodshot, and he had dark circles around his eyes, making him look rather scary-looking. A group of first years passed them, and when they caught a glance from Harry, they shrieked and ran away as quickly as they could. "You don't look good, either. People are starting to think that you are a Death Eater."

"Didn't they think that before?" Harry growled in a low voice. "Nah, I'm fine. I'm really tired, that's all. Been in the library for too long, I guess."

"'Been in the library', please!" Draco said sardonically. "You've never set a foot there before, why are you now?"

"I might've been there a few times before without informing you; and mind you, that was when I only needed to look for something. They have a wide selection of some really helpful books there, you know. You should try and visit there too, sometime. It wouldn't kill you."

"What were you looking for, anyway?" Blaise asked curiously.

"A spell," Harry replied simply.

"A spell?"

"Yeah."

Luckily, for Harry, they reached the class just in time, so he didn't have to explain more than that.

Professor Lupin asked everyone to take their seats. They have all expected to hear about the approaching Dueling Club, and when the last student sat down, Lupin clapped his hands once and smiled broadly.

"I've received the last details about the Dueling Club," he said. "After discussing it with the Headmaster, we decided that the Great Hall will be too small, so the Club will be held on the Quidditch pitch, that way, the whole school could also come and watch.

"Now, for the timings: Seventh year students will be dueling between 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Then there's two hours break, during which you can eat lunch. And then from 2 until 5 p.m. you will be dueling.

"For your protection, each one of you will be receiving this –" Lupin took out something from his pocket, and held it up for everyone to see. It was a thin, white, plastic bracelet that looked just like the one that patients usually wore in a Muggle hospital.

"Hey, that's my brother's Shield Bracelet!" Ron Weasley called happily. Harry rolled his eyes. Great, he'll have to wear something that is Weasley-made.

Lupin chuckled. "Yes, it is. And though it is very practical sometimes, it can only protect you from getting seriously hurt. Please notice that it won't block simple jinxes that can be lifted later, like freezing charms or the Jelly-Legs jinx, for example," he said.

The class went on as usual after that, and when the bell rang, Harry once again stayed behind to talk to Lupin after everyone left.

"Yes, Harry?" he asked.

"I found this spell in a book. I think it can be very useful," Harry explained.

"What spell?"

"It's called the Confundus Charm."

"Ah, right. It's a good spell when it used cleverly," Lupin said with a small smile.

"Could you teach me how to do it right?" Harry asked eagerly.

"I can, but I'm afraid I'm too busy tonight, Harry. I need to get things ready for the Dueling Club. I've been meaning to tell you that we don't have a practice session tonight," Lupin said, truly sounding like he was sorry.

Harry looked disappointed. "Oh, that's okay. Too bad we can't tomorrow night, either; I've got loads of essays to submit and I haven't got started working on them yet."

Lupin seemed to think about something for a second, and then he said, "You know, I'm not teaching in the next hour, we can practice it now, if you don't mind missing your next class," he suggested.

Harry's mouth broke into an expectant grin. "Yes, please! I've got Herbology! I'll do anything to escape that!" he said excitedly.

"Fine, I'll write you a note and give it to Professor Sprout," Lupin said. "Well, don't just stand there; take out your wand, if you wish to get started."

Harry pulled his wand out and stared at Lupin, waiting for any further instructions.

"I better put this on," Lupin muttered quietly. He meant to put the Shielding Bracelet on his left wrist, but then stopped and took it off. "Or maybe not. We won't be able to know whether it worked or not. We use – here, a spider."

Lupin picked up a large spider he found crawling in the corner of the classroom, and put it for Harry on his desk. Harry looked at the spider. He didn't really know what he should do with it. He didn't really know what the spell will do to it.

"Right," said Lupin, pacing around Harry and the desk. "So, the incantation for the Confundus Charm is 'Confundo'."

"Confundo," Harry repeated to himself, memorizing it.

"This charm is not simple, but not too complex, either. With a bit of practicing, I assume you'll get the hang of it. What it does at first is

creating a wave of confusion on your opponent. He may hear correctly, but won't register what is said, since he'll try to focus on what made him so confused. His vision will become blurred, and his eyes won't be able to focus. That way he won't be able to concentrate like he normally would. It will simply weaken him. You should know, though, that the wave will last for only a few seconds, and then will fade away. After that, your opponent will see whatever you want him to see. If you really want to cast this spell on Dean, I suggest you don't start with it, but save it for later.

"Now, to work this charm properly, you need to think what exactly you want Dean to see or believe, and that way you can trick him and win the duel, by confusing him to see something that only he will see."

"So if I want to confuse the spider, for instance, to believe that I'm its prey, what do I do?" Harry asked. "How do I make it feel all the stuff you just described? Do I just cast the spell? If so, then why is it supposed to be difficult?"

"You won't be able to cast it because it's too hard to produce if you have not practiced it enough. You need to really concentrate on what you want the spider to see or believe. Clear your head and think about the illusion the spell is suppose to create, what you want the spider to see you as, then cast the spell."

Lupin moved to sit on his chair behind the desk, folding his arms over his chest, and watching Harry closely. The spider was now standing still on an old book that lay on the desk, and Harry looked at it carefully. Concentrating on what he wanted the spider to see, he pointed his wand at it and called "Confundo."

Nothing happened. The spider rubbed his front legs together, but stayed still. Harry tried again, concentrating harder on his goal. Five minutes had passed, and after several failures, Harry gave up. He was panting heavily. He didn't know it would be so difficult and frustrating. It was so hard that it made him feel completely exhausted.

"That's okay, Harry, it's a hard spell to perform," Lupin said calmly, watching Harry catch his breath. "I think it's better you forget about it _"

"No," Harry cut in, his breathing are still shallow. "I want to do it. I want to try again."

Ron and Hermione's next lesson was Charms. Professor Flitwick told them to start practicing the Time-Freezing Charm they studied in their last lesson. While Hermione managed to stop her watch and the hourglass that Professor Flitwick gave her several times by now without any difficulties, Ron was rummaging through his bag, looking for something. He was starting to get worried he might have lost it somewhere, but couldn't remember where.

"Mr. Weasley," squeaked Professor Flitwick as he came over. "Why aren't you practicing the charm like everyone else?"

"Sorry, Professor," he said hastily, putting his bag down. "But I can't find my wand anywhere. I think I left it somewhere..." He emptied all his pockets and twice he ran his hand over to his ears, to see if he hadn't put it there without noticing. "I know I had it earlier."

"Don't you think you need to be more organized? This is the second time you've lost your wand, Ronald," Hermione whispered.

"Yes, I know that Hermione, there's no need to remind me. Great, now I'm going to get a Howler from my mum."

"And a T if you won't do anything in this lesson," said Flitwick, an angry tone in his voice. He then walked away from their table, observing the other students.

"Wait –" Ron suddenly called, standing up. Flitwick turned around and looked up at him. "Maybe I dropped it in Professor Lupin's classroom. May I please go and check there, Professor?"

"Be sure to make it quickly," Flitwick said with a nod. "Your grade depends on it."

Ron quickly left the class and ran as fast as he could one floor below. When he got there, he saw Lupin's classroom door was closed. He took in one long breath, but choked in a fit of coughs, when he heard a yell coming from inside the silent classroom.

Once he relaxed, Ron looked up and down the corridor. Nobody was there but him. He was sure the classroom was empty, it didn't sound like there was a class inside. Being in quite a hurry to get his wand and be back to his class, he shrugged it off, forcing himself to believe he was just imagining, only then he heard it again, louder than before, but still not that clear.

It wasn't a call for help, but sounded like someone yelling out an incantation, Ron had no doubt about that. Somehow he had a strange feeling that something was wrong. If he had someone else there with him to hear it, they would have told him that there's nothing wrong, that Lupin is probably teaching right now, and the class is practicing as usual, but Ron didn't think so. He recognized one person's voice, not several voices, and the incantation wasn't being repeated, as if there was a group of students there, studying.

Thinking of one reasonable thing to do, Ron walked slowly to the door and pressed his ear against it.

Inside, there were two people having a conversation. The first voice Ron recognized was Professor Lupin's. The second was quiet and muffled. Ron couldn't identify whom it belonged to. Ron didn't know if he should interrupt this conversation, it could be very distinct or important, but he didn't know what else to do. He needed his wand, or he'll fail today's Charms lesson.

He was about to knock on the door, when he heard Lupin talk with a tired voice.

"...If you want to do it, then do it, but I don't think you can."

There was a sigh, and a short silence followed. Ron pressed his ear to the door again, listening carefully. Who is Lupin talking to and what's going on?

The person Lupin was talking to was breathing rather heavily. Ron could hear his breathings, and it sounded like this person was quite angry.

"CONFUNDO!" yelled the other person; by the tone of his choked voice, it was obvious he was struggling to get the spell out of his mouth.

What spell is this? Ron panicked. And then, it hit him. He knew that voice. That's Harry Potter with Professor Lupin, he told himself. And when the name of his sworn enemy popped to his head, a sudden fear took place. Potter was casting a spell at Professor Lupin!

Without thinking much, he opened the door in a swift move and watched the scene that was before his eyes.

Harry Potter was pointing his wand at Professor Lupin. He was panting, and looked sweaty and tired, but angry all the same.

Professor Lupin was sitting in his chair in front of Harry, only the desk separating them. His hands were folded over his chest, like he was waiting for Harry to strike. It was then when Lupin acknowledged Ron's presence. Lupin turned his gaze to him, and looked at him calmly, like nothing was wrong. He even gave him a small smile.

Harry followed his gaze and looked at Ron like he had just insulted him deeply. He slowly lowered his wand, looking impassive, but yet menacing. He folded his arms as well, though not as same as Lupin had, it was as if he waiting for Ron to leave right away.

Ron tried his best not to look directly at Harry. "I... I'm sorry, Professor. I heard shouts, and I thought something might be..." He glanced briefly at Harry's fierce glare, and finished the sentence with a hoarse voice, "...wrong."

"That's all right, Ron," Lupin replied serenely. "Why are you out of class?"

"Be...because I think I've dropped my wand here somewhere. I...I came to look for it," he replied shakily. "If that's okay and I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, of course you're not. You need your wand," Lupin said with a small smile. He got up from his chair, pulled out his wand and pointed

it to where Ron sat earlier this morning. "Accio Ron's wand!" he called. The lost wand rose suddenly in the air in the back of the class, and flew right to Lupin's hand. "Here you go, Ron," he said as he walked over to him and handed him back his wand. "Keep it safe next time."

Ron nodded. "T...thank you. I'll do that," he stuttered and Lupin closed the door behind him.

Once he was safely outside the classroom, he leaned against the cool stone wall and sighed. He couldn't believe what he just witnessed to. The rumors were all true, just like he suspected. Harry Potter was indeed a Death Eater!

Checking the time on his watch, Ron saw it took him long enough to get his wand back, and hurried back to Charms. He couldn't wait to tell Hermione everything he just saw, and prove her wrong about Potter.

Harry felt like he had done something terribly wrong. Normally, being caught out of class by Ron Weasley wouldn't bother him that much, even if he was a Prefect, but something told him that he wasn't feeling guilty for nothing.

The look on Ron's face when he opened the door told Harry how shocked was Ron to find him there, in Lupin's class. His face has gone completely white, even paler than the usual bright shade of his skin. What exactly did he see? Harry wondered. He already knew Ron was positive that he was a Death Eater, so what now?

Didn't he see him practicing spells with Lupin just now? Or did he come to the wrong conclusion? Harry wasn't sure what exactly Ron had put into his head, but he knew he will tell someone about it as fast as he could; someone who is close to him, that's for sure.

Harry could just imagine how Ginny would react to whatever Ron will tell her. It will probably push her even further away from him. These past few days that went by, felt empty to him, without getting a good glimpse at her red hair, or hear her voice, even if she sounded angry or scared. It somehow made him feel whole whenever he saw her. He didn't know why.

He didn't know how to get himself out of this situation. After all, it wasn't his fault everyone thought he's a Death Eater. He didn't land himself in this position, Snape did. Why would Snape make him the Quidditch House team's Captain and then tell such lies about him like that? He knew that on some level, he had always hated him. He had his favorite students, Draco was one of them, but Harry was never even close. Harry still couldn't figure out why he chose him as the Quidditch Captain, and not Draco, if he hated him so much.

"Harry, are you okay?" Lupin asked, still leaning against the door.

Harry realized he was standing in place, looking down at the floor and not moving. He was staring into blank air, clutching his wand loosely between his numb fingers. "Yeah, I'm fine," he replied quietly.

"No, because it seemed to me like you were miles away for a moment there," Lupin noted, walking over.

"I said I'm fine," Harry insisted, shaking his head out of his thoughts, though he couldn't get rid of the memory of the last time he saw Ginny. Her face was as scared as Ron's had been just now. It made him feel a little twinge of pain in the pit of his stomach, just to picture her eyes wide with fear of him hurting her. Oddly enough, thinking how they met at the beginning of the year, he wanted her to get hurt as a payment for hurting him in the Quidditch pitch, but now he couldn't bear the thought of see her getting hurt. What changed?

'When are you going to ask out the red-head?' Blaise's voice rang in his ears.

"Um... okay, maybe you should forget about Confundus?" Lupin said, looking nervously around his desk.

"Why?" Harry looked up at him. Didn't he make any progress?

Lupin pointed to the desk. Harry looked down and noticed the spider had vanished. "Okay, so it might be here somewhere," Harry said, crouching down to look for it under the desk. "It's a large spider; it can't have disappeared so quickly. We'll summon it." He was about to

call the summoning charm, but then Lupin pushed his hand back down.

"I'm afraid our little friend has been blown up by you, Harry," he said with a chuckle.

Harry looked down at the desk again. All he could see on the old book where the spider stood a few minutes before was a small pile of ashes, which was still smoking. "Great..." Harry muttered, running a hand through his hair. "I can't even do that right."

Lupin checked his watch. "We do have some time left. What do you say, I'll get another spider from my office, and you can try again? Maybe you'll succeed this time."

"No, it's no use. I can't concentrate now. There's too much on my mind."

Lupin looked at Harry closely, seeing how frustrated he was, he decided that he shouldn't give up so quickly. "Sit down, Harry," he said, and pointed to the closest table. Harry went to sit behind it and looked at his Professor. "Is there something troubling you? Something that isn't related to the Dueling Club?"

Was it that obvious? Harry thought. Maybe he can help me more than Blaise and Draco could?

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes," Harry answered. He could feel a hot drop of sweat sliding down from his forehead from his uneasiness, and hurried to wipe it with the back of his hand.

"Ron made you feel nervous, did he?"

"No, it's not him. Well, it's what he might tell people that bothers me more. You've heard the rumors, haven't you?"

"Oh, I did; quite amusing, I might say," Lupin chuckled. "Don't mind the rumors, Harry. Rumors aren't facts, and in your case, they're definitely incorrect. No matter how hurtful they can get, you should

always remember that you know the truth; you're not a Death Eater, Harry. There always will be someone who has a rumor going around about someone else. Today it's you and tomorrow it will be someone else. When people will find out the truth, they will come around, and some might apologize."

Harry let out a sigh in return. "Yeah, but it's not just that."

How exactly he supposed to say it?

Lupin eyes had a sudden twinkle in them and his lips formed a lopsided smile. "Ah, it's about a girl, isn't it?" he said knowingly. "You're afraid she'll believe the rumors and turn her back on you, right?"

Harry nodded. "You're good," he said with his eyebrows raised.

"And this girl, I assume, doesn't know how you feel about her?" Lupin went on.

Harry shook his head. Then he realized something. "I don't even know what I feel about her," he mumbled. "I haven't exactly told anyone about it, either..."

"I see. Look, Harry," he got back to business, "if you really want to do the Confundus Charm right, you need to concentrate. You can't let other things occupy your mind. As long as you keep things to yourself and won't let them out, it will only get worse. You need to figure out what exactly you feel for this girl. Now, if we want to make some progress today, we need to help you concentrate, meaning, you need to let this out."

Harry didn't know what Lupin expected from him. He may have told him he has a crush on someone, but he definitely will not open out his heart to him and tell him all about Ginny and how exactly he felt every time he saw her. No, he would have to protest.

He was about to tell that to Lupin, but then the Professor spoke instead. "That's why I'm going to give you this —"

Harry watched Lupin turn around to his desk and grabbing a small spare piece of parchment from one of the drawers. He held the parchment in front of Harry. Harry just looked at him strangely.

"How exactly is this parchment going to help me?" he asked, frowning, half expecting the parchment to grow a mouth and give him an advice.

Lupin simply tore the parchment in half. Now he held two small square pieces of parchment, both were the same size of the palm of his hand.

"Don't worry. You don't have to tell me anything." Lupin laid the two notes on Harry's table, side by side. Harry merely just stared at them, not sure what to do with them. "Like I said, the best way to get you focused is to get those feelings out. Don't ignore what you feel. Take out a quill and write on both papers the same thing. Write down her name and how you think you feel for her, and you'll see you feel more relieved."

Harry thought about it for a moment. Should he do it? There was nothing to lose, anyway. Thinking that this exercise might come out helpful, he did as Lupin had instructed him, but then he found out he was stuck. Again, he didn't know what he felt for Ginny.

A few moments have passed and Harry still hasn't written a single word. Lupin waited and watched him with his dilemma. Harry was confused. How is he suppose to get it out when he didn't even know what was there to get out?

"Here is my tip for you: Don't think too much on what you should write. Let your mind flow and your heart speak for itself. You'll write down the words without even noticing it," Lupin said.

Harry pressed the quill to the parchment and closed his eyes and tried to picture Ginny in his mind. At first she looked as grumpy as he first noticed her on the train at the beginning of the year; then her face was laughing, smiling and looked amused; and at last, scared and annoyed. He pictured her together with Dean, and he could feel his face flush red with anger. What was it that he felt? Why was he angry seeing her with Dean? Why did it made him feel relaxed when

he saw she was happy, and feel guilty when he saw her sad or scared? She had such an impact on him, so strong that it made him feel like his life depended on her. He remembered how he told himself to stay away, but was never able to do it.

He couldn't make up his mind. So he knew he had a crush on her, and he kissed her once (though it didn't turn out so well), and he couldn't stop thinking about her, he didn't think a day was worthwhile if he didn't get a chance to see her. Was Blaise right after all?

'I know you fancy her,' Blaise's voice teased him again. 'Just get over your denial and define what you're feeling towards her.' If Blaise could see it, why couldn't he?

Was it a just crush? He looked back at his past and tried to remember how he felt toward the other girls he went out with. He never had the same strong feelings for anyone other than Ginny. No, he told himself. This is more than 'just' a crush.

He slowly opened his eyes and looked down. His eyes grew wide with shock to find that he actually wrote down words on the two pieces of parchment, without even realizing it, just like Lupin said. He stared at what his hand wrote. The words were the same on both notes, and he couldn't believe he wrote them. It just couldn't be. For a short second he thought that Lupin had taken the chance to write this down by himself when Harry's eyes were closed, but that idea faded as quickly as it came, when Harry recognized the handwriting as his own.

Surprised, and yet pleased to finally get this out of his chest, he stared at Lupin, who was sitting comfortably in his teacher's chair.

"Did you do it?" Lupin asked and Harry nodded. He shielded the two pieces of parchment with his hands, embarrassed that Lupin would see what he wrote.

Lupin straightened up in his seat. "All right. You feel more relieved now?" Harry nodded again. He was still a bit shocked and couldn't form words, not even to tell Lupin that his plan was brilliant. He simply smiled widely.

"I told you. Now, the trick is to keep one note with you all the time and the other you leave here, on your desk, until we'll finish practicing for today, okay?"

Smiling despite himself, Harry nodded for the third time in a row. He folded the two notes. The one he kept in his pocket, while he left the other lying on the table.

Lupin went to his office and brought another spider. Harry focused really hard on it and on his goal. He missed for the first two times, but that was also because the spider kept moving around and didn't stay put like the previous one. And then, on his third try, after the spider stopped moving and Harry yelled the spell, the spider started to act differently. It walked forward a few inches and lowered its head, its pincers clicking eagerly all of the sudden.

"Try to move from side to side, Harry," Lupin whispered, watching the spider with amazement, as did Harry.

Harry slowly moved from side to side, the spider's gaze was locked upon him. Suddenly, it bounced forward, but Harry escaped from it. Harry laughed. He did it, he made the spider think he was its prey. The spider crawled on the floor and looked around to find its lost victim. Harry walked carefully behind it, so it won't notice him. Even though he was bigger than it, the charmed spider didn't see him.

"Great job, Harry! You did it!" Lupin chortled, clapping his hands. He pointed his wand at the spider and said "Finite." The spider came out of its trance and relaxed again like nothing had happened.

Harry felt like he finally achieved what he wanted all along, from the first time he asked Lupin to help him. That spell was all he needed to win the duel with Dean.

"Are you sure that's what you saw? Are you one hundred and ten percent sure?" Hermione asked Ron quietly over lunch, when they insulated themselves away from everyone else, so no one could hear them.

"Yes, for the umpteenth time! I'm just telling you what I saw," Ron whispered back.

Hermione went quiet for a moment, thinking of what Ron had just told her, and running it through her head over and over again. "No, there's got to be some logical explanation for it!" she hissed.

"Yeah, that he's threatening the teachers, like I told you from the beginning! Stop defending him for once, Hermione, and see the other clear and obvious side of the story. Besides, you know I would never make up something like that."

"I didn't say you are. This is just so surreal. He doesn't act like a Death Eater in disguise – beside what you say, of course," she added quickly. "Why would he be pointing a wand at Professor Lupin? Isn't he a friend of his parents?"

"When you're given an order from your fellow Death Eaters, you must obey it, Hermione. No matter how close you are with the person you are suppose to kill," noted Ron.

"And how exactly you know that?" Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "Killed anyone lately, Ron?"

"No!" he cried indignantly, sounding offended. Quickly, he changed the subject back. "Look, I heard a shout coming from inside the classroom. It wasn't exactly a shout, more like a curse or an incantation being said out loud. It sounded like Carefo... no, that's not it... Can-fun-do, maybe? No, that just doesn't make any sense whatsoever..." He was talking more to himself now, rather to Hermione, and then shook his head.

"Could it be Confundo?" she asked, her eyes widening in shock.

"Yes, that is it!" He nodded vigorously.

"And you said Lupin acted like nothing had happened after you entered the class and explained what you've heard?"

"That's right. Why, what is this spell?" Ron asked worriedly.

"That's the confusion charm, Ron. A person uses it to make the one they attack with it to believe what they want them to believe, to confuse them."

"So Potter used it on Lupin, to make him believe he's innocent! 'If you want to do it, then do it, but I don't think you can,' that's what Lupin said to him. It might have really pissed him off, so he used it to show Lupin that he can do it. I told you, Hermione! This is as bad as the Imperius Curse or Obliviate."

"Well, we bound to tell Dumbledore, but we can't now, we'll go to see him later after classes are over," said Hermione in a rushed voice.

"Okay. Hopefully Potter won't kill anyone during the next few hours..." Ron muttered.

Harry watched Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger talking at the very neglected end of the Gryffindor table. He, on the other hand, was sitting alone, not sure where Draco and Blaise were. He had heard some mutterings about them staying back at the greenhouses because they had done something, but he thought he'd ask them about it later when he'll see them. It was actually great, because he wasn't showered with questions for once, and he could easily watch the two Gryffindors without any interruptions. They looked a bit nervous, and they were whispering to each other something that they obviously didn't want anyone else to hear. From time to time, one of them looked around to check they weren't being overheard.

Though there were millions of optional reasons what they could be talking about, Harry had a good clue what was the exact topic of their conversation, without the need to eavesdrop.

He just couldn't let Ron tell Ginny what he was obviously suspecting. She already believed he was a Death Eater, and he didn't want her to believe whatever Ron was telling his girlfriend at this moment. Harry wasn't stupid; he already knew Ron was certain he was a Death Eater. Now he was going to stretch this rumor even wider because of what he thought he saw in Lupin's classroom, then he would tell this to Ginny and then she would get even further away from him.

So, when Granger took off early for her next class, Ron finally finished stuffing himself with food. He stood up and strode out of the Great Hall. Harry walked after him, twice as fast, in order to catch up with him.

When he reached him, he surprised him by grabbing his shoulder from behind. "Weasley, could I have a word if you don't mind?" he whispered.

This startled Ron, and he stopped walking. He turned around to see Harry looking back at him with an unreadable expression on his face.

"What do you want?" Ron asked fearfully, a shiver going down his spine.

Harry got straight to the point. "You didn't tell anyone by any chance what you saw earlier in Lupin's class, did you?"

Ron's eyes widened. "N-no. Of course not. I-I wouldn't," he stammered.

"No, because if you did, I'll be very... upset. You would tell me if you told someone, right?"

"I didn't tell a soul," Ron said with a choked voice.

Harry stared at him pointedly. "Not even Granger?"

"No, I swear."

"Good. Keep it that way," said Harry with a small smirk, and walked off to his next lesson.

"Yeah, maybe you let me live until the end of the year," mumbled Ron behind Harry's back. As soon as his classes were over, he rushed back to Hermione.

"We can't go to Dumbledore," he said at once.

"Why not?" she asked, looking confused.

"And you can't tell anyone what I told you. Not Dumbledore, not Ginny, not anyone. Pretend like you don't know anything about it, either. It's has to stay between us. We better not talk about it again, too," he said so fast he almost forgot to breathe.

"Ron, you're scaring me. Did something happen?" she asked worriedly.

Ron gulped, inhaled a sharp breath and then said, "Potter... kind of... threatened me not to tell."

"What? Are you sure?" Ron nodded. "He threatened you?" Another nod. "That is exactly why we need to go to Dumbledore, then! He is the only one that can put a stop to it! Potter can't keep going around the school and threatening people whenever he wants!"

"So you finally believe me now?" Ron asked. "You don't side with him anymore?"

"No, if he's threatened you, than I guess I do believe you," she said, but didn't sound that convinced. "Unless you misunderstood him."

"Hermione!" Ron hissed. "He told me not to tell anyone what I saw, because then he'll be very upset – His words."

She sighed. "Okay, let's got to Dumbledore," she said, and led the way to the Headmaster's office.

But ten minutes later, Ron and Hermione left Dumbledore's office, feeling disappointed with themselves. Nothing they'd said seemed to convince the Headmaster that Harry Potter was a Death Eater. He told them that he trusted Harry and that he believed in him. Dumbledore also wasn't pleased to hear such accusations about his students from the school Prefects, and dismissed them with an assurance that there was nothing they need to worry about, and that they shouldn't bother him with this topic again.

"Great, now I feel stupid," Hermione said, once they returned to their common room. They sat on the couch and stared at the fire distractedly.

"Sorry, it's all my fault," Ron said glumly. "Could've accepted a T in Charms, but nooo! I had to go down to Lupin's classroom and see that!"

"See what?"

Ron and Hermione turned their heads and saw Ginny walking towards them. She sat herself on the hearthrug and looked at them. "What did you see in Lupin's classroom? Ooh... did you see the answers to the test I have tomorrow?" she asked excitedly, rubbing her hands mischievously and grinning broadly.

"No," Ron replied quietly and gave her a weird look.

"Ginny!" Hermione scolded, her mouth agape.

"What?" Ginny retorted defensively. "I could've really used a bit of help, but someone was too busy!"

"Fine, I will make you some notes, but cheating is not the way to pass a test."

Ginny waved her hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it, I wasn't serious anyway. I just wanted you to give up and make me those notes. So what did you see in Lupin's classroom, Ron?"

"Er..."

Once again, Ginny burst out excitedly. "Ooh, let me guess, you caught Lupin snogging a student?" she suggested.

"No. Ginny –"

"A female student, then?" she tried again.

Hermione started chuckling. Ron rolled his eyes, "No!"

Ginny looked taken aback. "Really? I always thought he was a poof. All the facts pointed it out: He's thirty-something, nice and still single... Well, if not a student then a teacher perhaps? Snape? No, he's not his type. Madam Hooch? Trelawney? Eww! Don't tell me it's McGonagall!"

"Ginny, Lupin was not snogging anyone in his classroom!" Ron yelled. "He also was not in any other intimate situation with anyone, and nor was he naked or wrapped around the waist with a swim ring in a shape of a yellow duck!"

A few people around the room cast them weird looks, but he didn't care.

"Damn, I hate it when you know the questions I want to ask," Ginny said in disappointment.

Hermione was howling with laughter and tears were forming in the corners of her eyes. "Ginny..." she managed to say once she calmed down. She thought it's best not to tell her who Ron really saw doing what in Lupin's classroom. "Ron lost his wand so he went to find it in Lupin's classroom, but found a spider crawling on it, and you know how he is with spiders. Well, anyway, he had no choice but get his wand back or else Flitwick will give him a T, so he bravely kicked the spider away, and took his wand back."

"Yeah, only he gave me a P because I didn't manage to stop my watch," he complained.

Ginny giggled. "Well, next time, maybe you should let Hermione pause time for you so by the time she'll finish her lame story, you'll be back in class."

Ginny entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom on Friday morning, ready to take the test she studied for all week. She reread the notes Hermione made for her the night before and repeated to herself the main ideas she needed to remember.

When she took her usual seat at the front row, Professor Lupin entered and ordered them all to clean their tables of all the

unnecessary paperwork and sit down. He began to pass them the exams and when he reached Ginny, he asked her to put all the notes she dropped on the floor in her bag. Ginny looked at him, confused, and checked the floor for any of her notes. All she found was a folded piece of parchment that she was positive didn't belong to her. She opened it to check just in case, but found inside something very unexpected.

"Ginny, I thought I told you to put that in your bag," Lupin said. "Put it away now or I'll have to fail you," he warned.

Ginny's mind had floated to somewhere else, and the Professor's voice barely registered inside. She couldn't stop staring at the note she held in her hand. What kind of joke is this?

Ginny suddenly felt a hand grabbing the note from her palm and putting it in her bag. Luckily it wasn't Professor Lupin, but good old Luna, who didn't want her friend to fail the test. Ginny smiled weakly at her as a thank-you, and shook her head forcibly to restore her thoughts back to the test. It was hard to concentrate after what she read in the note, but she felt like she did pretty well.

The bell rang and they all submitted the tests. Ginny felt like she needed to get out of there as fast as possible. Luna caught up with her and stopped her in the hallway.

Ginny looked like a mess, and Luna began to worry. "What is it, Ginny? Didn't you do well on the test?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, it's not that. It went fine."

Luna looked at her suspiciously. "Are you sure? Because you read that note that Professor Lupin almost failed you for... What, didn't you study at all?"

Ginny ran a hand through her hair absently. "I did. I studied all week long. It wasn't that kind of note, anyway, and it didn't belong to me, either. Someone left it on the floor by my desk, so I thought I should pick it up to see if it was mine so Professor Lupin won't think that I

tried to cheat on the test, but it was mine... It was... something else..." she finished slowly.

She put her hand in her bag and started rummaging inside, then pulled out the mysterious note and showed it to Luna.

Luna looked at the note with raised eyebrows and then back at Ginny. "And you found it on the floor, next to your desk?"

Ginny nodded. "Isn't it weird? Like the person who wrote it put it there on purpose so I'll find it. But who could write such a thing?"

"A rackfet," Luna said at once without a doubt in her mind. She handed Ginny back the note and they walked to their next class. Ginny looked at her friend with a puzzled expression on her face. This was one of the times that Luna happened to invent a bizarre creature that no one ever heard of except for the readers of The Quibbler.

"What's a rackfet, again?" she asked, like she forgot and needed to remember.

"Rackfets are very rare, small creatures that have a lifetime of a week. They usually pull stuff like that, you know, prank stuff, until they die," she explained with her dreamy voice, sounding very sure of herself. "Daddy's magazine had a really fascinating article about them last month, didn't you read it?"

Ginny wrinkled her nose. She didn't like lying to her friend, but the stories The Quibbler came up with were just weird. "No, I guess I missed that issue," Ginny mumbled quietly. "But as much as I would like to believe a rackfet wrote me a prank note, I really think a student did it. Maybe not even as a prank, maybe it was sincere."

Honestly, Ginny couldn't really think of anyone in particular at the moment. Luna suggested it was Colin Creevey, because he always sat behind her in Defense classes. Ginny hoped it wasn't him. "Colin is cute, but I mean just cute, like unicorn-cute," she said as an excuse. But she didn't know what she would do if she'll find out it was really Colin who wrote the note. What would she say then?

She glanced at the caption on the note again. A lost expression crossed her face. Who could have written it? She racked her brain but couldn't think of anyone. She hadn't noticed if someone had looked at her with affection recently. Well, except for Dean, though she knew what his handwriting looked like, and it wasn't even similar to the handwriting on the note; and of course, there was Neville, who she just found out liked her. First there was Neville and now Colin, she thought. What is with everyone lately? I'm not that popular... The lettering still looked familiar to her, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it.

She decided to drop it for now, concentrating on a conversation with Luna about how well they did the test, and somehow, Ginny wasn't sure how, the rackfers issue came up again...

Saturday finally arrived, and Harry couldn't wait until he'd be dueling with Dean. Time, however, seemed to go even slower than possible. The buzzing sound of excited students filled the Great Hall over breakfast, and soon, the seventh years started their turn in the Dueling Club down at the Quidditch pitch. Most of the school went to watch them duel, and almost filled all the stands in the stadium.

Harry saw all the seventh years gathering around a group of Professors, among them were the four Heads of Houses, Lupin, Dumbledore and also Madam Pomfrey and Hagrid, for some reason, was also presents.

In the middle of the pitch stood a long stage, and near the group of teachers was a small golden cauldron. From where he was sitting, Harry couldn't see clearly what the cauldron contained inside, but in the dark grey, skies of November, he noticed something thick and red shimmering inside, almost like burning lava.

Lupin began to describe the rules to the seventh years, and shortly after that, he turned to the golden cauldron. He taped his wand twice, and looked inside. He called out two names, the first turned out to be a Ravenclaw girl, and the second Gryffindor boy.

The two of them came closer to Lupin, took a Shield Bracelet from him and put them on their wrists. They got onto the stage, bowed to each other and backed away a few steps from each other.

A second did not pass, and each one of them yelled a different kind of jinx. The girl, smart as every Ravenclaw, ducked in time and escaped the spell that was shot towards her. The Gryffindor, on the other hand, got struck and his body immediately started to shake madly. Seeing he couldn't function and continue the duel, Lupin called the Ravenclaw as the winner of the first fight. The Ravenclaw house started to clap their hands and cheer for her.

And that's how it went for everyone else. Some duels were short and quick, while other took several minutes until someone was called as the victor. Harry and his friends spent lunch commenting on the duels they'd seen, and made suggestions and ideas how they thought they would perform. They shook hands and made jokes with fellow seventh year Slytherins that won on their duels.

Harry was positive he would do well. He had so much confidence that he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to finally get payback for what Dean did to him. He had a smug smile on his face, but it slowly disappeared as he remembered his only concern. What if Lupin didn't keep his promise, and didn't let him duel with Dean? How would he make the golden cauldron show his name inside together with Dean's, anyway? He guessed he didn't have anything else to do but wait and see. He trusted Lupin would keep his promise.

And at last, the sixth years were called at 2 p.m. to the Quidditch Pitch. When they got there, the stage looked way bigger than it looked from up in the stands. When everyone finally gathered around the stage, Harry looked around. A satisfied smile played on his lips when he noticed Dean was standing with the rest of the Gryffindors who thought to show up. Whether Ginny told Dean to come or not, it didn't matter now, because he was there. He tried to search for her in the crowd, but there were so many people there, that he couldn't even spot the bright color of her hair.

The same group of teachers appeared after everyone settled and went quiet. Lupin got up on the stage and looked at them.

"Hello everyone," he greeted happily. "Glad you all came! Before we begin, I want to clarify the rules. Since you already learned a few years ago how to duel, we won't waste time to cover what you already know. So, as you have probably seen earlier, the cauldron picks your name with someone from a different house. You'll get a Shield Bracelet from me and then you face your opponent, you bow, take a few steps back and then, on my count, you start dueling. The attacks will only include light jinxes, charms and spells. It's of course unnecessary to say that Unforgivable Curses are forbidden."

At that, Harry could feel everyone's stares fixed on him. He rolled his eyes in annoyance. His insides just wanted to scream and tell them the truth, but he refrained himself from doing that and gave them all an ugly smile.

Lupin clapped his hands once. "That's it. So now I'm going to call two names, and those two are going to be our first duelers."

He walked to the golden cauldron, tapped his wand twice on it, and a light red fume was emitted. Lupin looked inside the cauldron, smiled, and called. "Ernie Macmillan, Hufflepuff and Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor."

The first fight was over in no time. Though each of them was about the same level as the other, they both suffered light injuries after a few spell casting. Lupin had to call it a tie.

The morale was extremely high. The crowd cheered and made the air feel lighter. Other names were called, and a few more duels ended before Blaise got picked. His opponent was a slim Ravenclaw girl. Unbelievably, the girl was announced as the victor a few minutes later. Blaise, after being taken care of by Madam Pomfrey, returned and waited with Draco and Harry, looking very ashamed of himself, for losing to a girl. Harry and Draco did their best not to laugh at him.

Amazingly, Draco's opponent was Ron Weasley. Ron looked concerned, though not entirely scared. He exhaled deeply and held his wand really tight in his hand. Draco, with a grin on his face, got onto the stage and dueled with him. A minute, two minutes, five have

passed, and the two were still shouting spells at each other. Draco eventually got tired of 'playing around'. He held his wand high and conjured up a very angry-looking snake. Ron froze at the sight of the snake and stood in place, motionless, not doing a thing, but keeping his distance away from the creature. Draco seized upon the opportunity and shot a freezing charm at Ron. Ron's body went rigid and fell to the floor with a loud thud, and Draco was called as the victor.

Then, when Lupin called out the first name of the next two duelers, Harry was surprised to hear he called out for Dean. Quickly and nervously, Harry caught Lupin's eyes and then saw him secretly tapping on the cauldron one more time. Lupin looked inside the cauldron again, and called: "Harry Potter, Slytherin."

Then there was silence, like people tried to hear carefully if they've heard right. Then a wave of whispers filled the air and when Harry got up, the silence returned. Harry didn't care, however. He was finally going to get his vengeance at Dean. And after that, no one will call him a coward anymore.

Smiling inwardly, Harry got onto the stage. After he took the Shield Bracelet from Lupin, he rolled up his sleeves and put it on his wrist. A sudden gasp escaped from most of his fellow sixth years. Looking at some of their faces, he realized what the deal was about. Their eyes were fixed on his left forearm. They were surprised to find that he didn't have the Dark Mark on it. Harry ignored them all, and threw Lupin a last quick glance. He saw him nodding feebly at him for reassurance and it made him feel even more confident than before.

Harry turned around. Dean was only a few steps away from him, a stern look in his eyes. He tightened the grip on his wand nervously.

Harry didn't want to bow to him, he just wanted to get it over with, but according to the rules, this was the proper way to duel. So they bowed, or at least, Dean had; Harry barely arched his back forward, and then quickly straightened back up. He took a few steps back, and held his wand at the ready, yearning to hear Lupin's voice call "one".

"Ready?" Lupin asked. Harry closed his eyes briefly and remembered the plan he had in his mind for the last week. "Three, two, one –"

"Protego!" he yelled immediately. This was a good choice to start with, as Dean yelled the Langlock spell as he heard 'one'. The spell hit the shield and bounced back, missing Dean by an inch. Harry was disappointed it didn't hit him, it could've spared him a few minutes and a few spells.

They continued dueling. One was shooting a spell, and the other was avoiding it. After a few minutes, Dean was bleeding heavily from his nose, and Harry was having a major headache. Harry realized his plan wasn't going well as planned. It was time for phase two.

Despite the throbbing in his head, he forced himself to concentrate really hard on what he wanted Dean to see and believe. All the practice he had with Lupin about this spell was coming back to him.

Dean was smiling, enjoying the support the Gryffindors were giving him. He thought he had it, that Harry was going to lose. Harry was starting to feel the effects of the jinx Dean hit him with starting to get worse, and the weakness showed on his face. That is why Dean looked so triumphant. He was positive they would call him the winner. Lupin was thinking on doing the same thing, but then Harry raised his wand.

"Confundo!" he yelled with difficulty. Dean didn't even have time to respond, he didn't see that coming. A streak of white light was shot from the tip of Harry's wand and hit Dean in the chest. Dean staggered back a few steps, and another gasp was emitted from the crowd. Ron and Hermione exchanged looks with each other.

Dean looked dumbfounded for a moment. He blinked his eyes rapidly, like trying to see in focus, and then he shook his head and looked straight at Harry.

Harry's throat went dry. It didn't work, he told himself, panic rushing through his body, his heart beating fast. He didn't know what to do now. The Confundus Charm was his only idea. He didn't think to have a backup spell, just in case that something like this happens. He

wished he would have practiced the charm a few more times, and then he wouldn't have to find himself in this situation. He knew he couldn't try again, either. Dean will predict it and block it right away. Harry really didn't know what to do.

Dean started to look around. He turned in his place, like searching for something, and as Harry saw his new behavior, he smiled proudly to himself. It had worked! Dean turned around, searching for a missing Harry, even when Harry stayed right where he was. That's what he wanted him to believe: that he had disappeared.

"I'm right here," Harry said in a singsong voice, teasing him a bit.

Dean turned around in his place and looked around again. He couldn't see Harry anywhere and he didn't know where he went. He was so confused...

In the corner of his eyes, Harry could see Draco and Blaise looking at the scene with their mouths agape in amazement.

Then it was the time to actually duel and have some fun. Well, for Harry anyway. At first he shot a jinx that caused Dean to feel like he cut his hands, though it was only in his imagination. Then, he hit him with a spell that caused him to fall down to the ground. All this time, Dean was shooting spells all around the place, not sure where to aim his wand since he couldn't find Harry. Then, luckily for him, one of his spells hit Harry in the chest. He fell backwards and landed on his bottom.

They both stood up again, at the same time. "What's the matter, Thomas? Not lost, are you?" Harry asked mockingly, as he saw Dean looking around for him again. Then all of the sudden, Dean stopped moving, and looked down at his feet.

And when Harry least expected it, he saw Dean raise his wand at him. He didn't even hear the incantation, but only saw a ball of fire coming towards him in a speed. He felt a sharp burn on his arm, where he tried to protect his eyes in an instinct. He was on the ground once again and looked to check his arm, feeling a sharp stinging sensation on his wrist, and then he saw what got burned; it was the Bracelet

and right underneath it, Harry noticed a small, red burn mark on his flesh. He didn't even have the time to wonder how Dean broke through the Confundus Charm, he already had another idea. Hit the Bracelet, he told himself.

"Incendio," he called, not even bothering to stand up. A long tongue of flame erupted from Harry's wand and hit Dean's in the wrist. He yelped in pain and Harry knew it worked, and while Dean was busy feeling his bleeding wrist, Harry had the chance to shoot another Trip Jinx at him. Dean slipped backwards again and gasped for air as his body hit the floor. He stayed lying motionless for a few seconds, his arm staining the front of his robes with blood.

Harry just watched him lying sprawled like that, his mind blocking the cheers his fellow Slytherins erupted with as he only heard Lupin announced that he was the winner. All he could think of was how weak Dean looked at the moment, when he wasn't aiming a wand at someone who was defenseless. Harry knew he had looked the same way when Dean stunned him in Hogsmeade, and frankly, he didn't care about how he looked. He was glad, and not at all sorry, that he finally made Dean see how it had been for him.

A/N: That was long. And thinking it was combined at first with chapter 11... Well, anyway, I hope you liked it. First, I don't want to elaborate about it in the next chapter, so I'll say it here: The Shielding Bracelet tore because it was sensitive to fire. Harry was actually about to tell Ron to tell Fred and George to fix the bracelets because they were defective. Like Lupin said, they can't protect from everything. I cut that out because it didn't fit. I also wanted to note that the idea of the shielding bracelet came before I read HBP, so the idea wasn't taken from there.

Now, about the note Ginny found, I didn't want to tell yet what is written inside because I'm saving it for later, but I'm sure you all have a pretty good guess what she read there, it's not so hard to figure out. Chapter 13 will discuss about it more.

Chapter 13 is nearly finished now, and I'll probably send it to my Beta by the end of the week. You can check my profile page once in a while to see updates on this story.

And a final note: I'll be leaving for a month or so on the 29th, so chapter 14 will be written when I have the time and posted only after Beta process. I'm sorry if it will take a while to get posted.

Reviews are appreciated and more than welcome ;)

Well, until next time... bye bye :)

Chapter 13 – Stupidity and Lack of Sleep:

Rain was pouring down forcefully outside the castle, now, when November was almost ending. It had been raining for days now, almost nonstop. Winter finally settled down and it was expected to linger for a few more cold months. Although it was freezing cold outside, the castle remained warm and held a comfortable feeling within the corridors and classrooms, which everyone enjoyed.

Apart from the sound of the heavy raindrops hitting the windowpanes, it was a quiet night. It had been the same every night since the Dueling Club ended. In the Slytherin sixth year boys' dormitory, almost all the occupants were soundly asleep, occasionally emitting a loud snore or a muffled groan; everyone was asleep, besides Harry.

For days, he had found himself unable to get much sleep. He lay awake in his bed, tossing from side to side as if trying to find a comfortable position so that he might find it relaxing and let his eyes close. Minutes later, he turned to lie on his back, staring up into nothing, as the darkness of the room enveloped him. He held his duvet to his chin and drummed his fingers on the headboard of the bed, while all sorts of thoughts swept through his mind. It usually went back to focusing on one particular subject, which he unsuccessfully had tried to avoid while trying to get to sleep. Her name was Ginny Weasley, and no matter how much he tried, she wouldn't leave his head. She was now a regular visitor who always came at night, whether he was dreaming or still awake.

Knowing he wouldn't get to sleep in the next few hours, he realized it'd be best at least to think about things other than Ginny. The Dueling Club, for some reason, was the first thing that came to his mind. Ever since then, he finally had his peace and quiet. Finally, he could let out a sigh of relief because people started coming to apologize to him for giving him the cold shoulder or offending him in every way, when they mistakenly thought he was a Death Eater. All of them, of course, were Slytherins (at least those who weren't on the dark side), since Harry never made friends with people from the other houses. He waited to hear an apology from Granger or her boyfriend, or perhaps even from Ginny, but none came, and he knew now not to expect anything from them.

The younger Slytherins started to look at him with some sort of awe after his duel with Dean Thomas, like he was their hero. They made up some exaggerated nicknames for him, like: 'The Best Dueller in Slytherin,' or in some cases: 'The Best Dueller in School.' Harry didn't show any signs of if he liked it or not, because deep inside, he knew it was all a lie. Without Lupin's help, he would've never gotten this title in the first place.

Despite the reoccurring questioning, Harry never told anyone how he learned to do the Confundus Charm – which was after all N.E.W.T level spell. He didn't want to give Lupin away and tell everyone that the Defense Professor had practically helped him cheat. It would get them both in trouble if any of the school staff found out their little secret.

From time to time, Harry had a chance to see Dean walking around the school alone, or with a couple of his mates. He never saw him around Ginny and thought they must have had a row or something. Every time he and Harry passed each other, Dean would turn back and look at him sullenly, clearly thinking it wasn't over. For Harry, however, it was. He had no reason to seek a fight with him again.

What troubled him the most was the fact that Ginny seemed to keep her distance from Dean. Surely they didn't... break up? More than once Harry had thought it could be real, but he didn't want to get his hopes up. Ginny and Dean were too close and happy. Why would they break up?

It was amazing how Ginny fought her way back into his thoughts once more. Maybe it was because he hadn't seen her lately. He'd only get a chance to get a fair look at her during meal times, but never had an opportunity to meet her alone again, not ever since he ran into her on her way to class after the all "Hogsmeade incident" he had with Dean. She always seemed to be around her friends, and if they happened to walk in the same corridor, she would never even look at him.

It saddened him even more than before. It was absolutely exasperating to have such strong feelings for a girl who obviously

didn't feel the same way about him. It was eating him inside that she wasn't even looking his way anymore. Hadn't she heard he wasn't a Death Eater? Where was she the day of the Dueling Club, anyway? Was she still afraid of him after all?

Harry listened to the rain outside getting stronger. It pounded on his window forcefully. Tap, tap, tap. God, it drove him crazy. Why couldn't he just fall asleep?

A lightning struck a mile away, and a flash of light lit the room for a second. The thunder came a moment after, and Harry stayed still and listened to the storm outside. He never liked rain. He preferred snow in the winter and couldn't wait for the weather to be cold enough for snow to fall. Snow always reminded him of good times and Christmas. Christmas may have been right around the corner, but it seemed like the good times had vanished for the time being. Harry just couldn't call himself happy at the moment, what with Ginny, who doesn't give a damn about him, or with Lucius Malfoy, who could kill him and his parents anytime now.

The room was too dark for him now, he needed light to think straight, and to see that he was safely tucked in his bed and nothing menacing was near by. Reaching under his pillow for his wand and illuminating it, he also found a small piece of parchment there. He knew what it was, and the reason he put it there was because of the advice Lupin gave him. He needed that note to be with him all the time. When he was sleeping, he kept it under his pillow, and when he was awake, he kept it in his pocket. It was always protected, even better than prisoners in Azkaban.

Harry pulled out the note from underneath his pillow and unfolded it. He found that he could never stop looking at the words he absently scribbled on it days ago. He got used to the fact that it was he who wrote them down, but it still hadn't dawned on him completely that what he wrote was actually true. He knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that it was true, but just couldn't accept it. It didn't seem real to him. He never felt that way, so why now? Why about her?

Of course he would never tell a soul or let anyone see that note. Then again, he couldn't possibly keep it in his pocket forever. When he got

over the phase he's having right now with Ginny, he will chuck that note into the fire before anyone could read it. He was also afraid that if anyone did read it, he'd be so crimson with embarrassment and people would stop talking to him again, stop liking him. Such things could easily kill his reputation in Slytherin.

Harry kept staring at the note in his hands. He couldn't read it perfectly; his vision was blurry since he hadn't bothered putting on his glasses to read it. He already knew what was written on it. He traced the black writing with his finger, as though something would happen or maybe they will disappear. He didn't want them to disappear. It was proof his feelings were real.

"Hmmm..." mumbled one of Harry's roommates suddenly from the other end of the room. "Wha...? Potter! Put that light off, you prick! Some of us aren't vampires like you! We actually sleep at night, you know!" the boy hissed.

"Screw you, Nott," groaned Harry, but despite that, he extinguished the light of his wand, stuffed it and the note back under the pillow, and sank his head into it. He closed his eyes shut, forcing sleep to come, and hoping that maybe the Ginny in his head would be nice enough to let him sleep what was left of the night.

"Umm... no. Still not waking up."

Harry vaguely heard some voices. Some very annoying, disturbing voices. Somewhere far away, way behind knowledge, he thought he was losing it, completely going mental if he was hearing voices now. He desperately hugged his pillow tighter and sank his face deeper in it; maybe that way he wouldn't hear them anymore. The sensation of being forcibly shaken was barely registering in his mind.

"Just smack him on the head with a pillow or something, always worked before."

Something quite heavy but yet soft hit him in the face unexpectedly. Harry let out a low, complaining groan, wishing the attacking thing to disappear and let him sleep a bit more.

"I'm telling you, he's dead."

"He's not dead, you moron, he's breathing!"

"Maybe he's unconscious?"

"Here, try this..."

Suddenly, an icy cold liquid flushed his face and Harry awoke with a start. His eyes were wide with confusion and shock; his hands were flipping around maniacally, running through his wet hair. He blinked the water drops from his eyelashes, not that it helped clear his vision, since he was seeing blurry without his glasses either way. Laughter was ringing around the room when Harry finally came to his senses.

"Whadehell?" he muttered, his voice still husky from sleep.

"Good morning," greeted Draco lazily. Harry shoved his glasses up his nose and noticed his friend was already dressed for school, and was leaning against the door.

Blaise was standing in front of him with the now empty glass of water in his hand, his face grinning mischievously.

"What the fuck, Blaise?" Harry demanded, pulling the ends of a few wet locks of his black, messy and currently damp hair. "I'm soaked!"

"Well, you wouldn't wake up. You missed breakfast," his friend informed him. He gave him a piece of toast wrapped in a paper napkin. Harry took it, but merely stared at it before his eyes started to drift close on their own.

"Whoa –" Blaise said, clicking his fingers in front of Harry's eyes, and they snapped open again. "Wake up! What is it with you? You look like shit."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled sarcastically, taking a slow bite off his toast.

"No, I really mean it. You look absolutely drained. What were you doing last night that was so exhausting?" He added an amused grin.

"No what you think, that's for sure," Harry said. "I can't catch much sleep lately." He pinched the bridge of his nose when he let out a loud yawn.

"Oh," Blaise said stupidly, but then added with a knowing tone, "You know, I noticed that you have trouble sleeping when something is troubling you."

"You think?" Harry asked angrily. He was already aware of that.

Blaise frowned at him, and again tossed a pillow at his face, causing Harry to fall back on the bed. "Don't bite my head off! I was just trying to help! Anyways, you better get ready quickly, classes start in ten minutes. Remember, we've got Snape first. You don't want to fall asleep, head in your cauldron in his class, do you? We'll meet you there," he said, joining Draco at the door, and leaving Harry all alone.

"You could've at least brought me some coffee!" Harry shouted after him.

"Get your own coffee!" He heard him call back. He closed his eyes again, savoring how good it felt to do that, his eyes weren't stinging anymore and he felt relief. "And don't fall asleep again!"

Harry let out an angry grunt and forced himself off the bed to get ready.

Luckily, he managed to get an E on today's potion assignment and stay awake all through the double period they had with Snape. Once the lesson was over, he was on his way to the kitchens to grab a cup of coffee, which hopefully will hold him awake for the rest of the day.

He was on his way for his next class, when he crossed the entrance hall and saw two girls were coming his way. They were whispering to themselves about something, crouching over something they held together in their hands. The first girl had brown bushy hair, while the other had magnificent long, red hair. Harry couldn't help but smile when he saw her. He felt he was blushing from the neck up and hated himself for it. He lowered his head when they passed him,

embarrassed they'd see his flushed face, but they didn't even spare to glance at him.

"Well, who could have written it, then?" Ginny whispered fiercely, but Harry happened to still hear her voice.

"I have no clue. I spent the last few days in the library, searching for spells, but I tried everything I know, it won't do anything," Hermione said. "Maybe it's just a simple note, with nothing dark behind it."

"This is stupid!" Ginny said aloud, and Harry stopped to look back to see her raising her hands in defeat. "I'm giving up! Who ever wrote that note only wanted to drive me crazy!"

"Ginny, it's not true," Hermione said patiently. "We'll figure it out. We will find out who wrote this to you."

She was waving a small piece of parchment at her. Harry got a glimpse of a black line of words. His eyes went wide as he saw what it was. Ginny sighed and came over to take it back. She looked at the note again, let out another long sigh and went up the stairs, leaving Hermione alone.

It finally hit him. But no! It couldn't be true! He had both two notes with him all the time. Harry quickly started shoving his hands in all his pockets in try to find the two identical notes. All he found was the one he already knew he had. He was sure he took the second note from the desk in Lupin's classroom the other day, he must have had! But then again, he couldn't remember. She couldn't possibly have it! He rummaged through his bag, taking out books and long scrolls of parchment, but didn't find what he was looking for. She didn't just hold the second note! Panic was starting to take over. Please tell me she doesn't have the second note!

Nothing. He only had one note, and she, by the looks of it, had the other.

Sinking to the floor in despair, he gathered all his belongings and threw them back into his school bag. He could hear the bell ringing, signaling for students that the next lesson was about to start. People

all around him hurried to their classes. The floor trembled under his feet from all of them running together until the hall was completely silent again. He got up and looked around, suddenly seeing one girl watching him closely, a frown on her face. Harry saw Granger was about to say something, but he turned his back on her quickly and walked to his next class.

Ginny has the second note. That was all he could think of while he was walking to class. He was angry with himself, angry of being too stupid and forgetting the other note, and letting Ginny find it. He was supposed to keep it to himself, not to tell her. And now Granger knows he wrote it. Why there had to be two notes in the first place? Who knows how many people already read it, already talking about it behind his back, laughing about him. It was the last thing he wanted, the last thing he would have expected to happen.

Great! Just what he needed right now! He can forget about sleeping for the next two weeks or so. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

On the afternoon, Harry had his team out on the Quidditch pitch for a practice. It was quite dark with all the black clouds in the sky, and the sun only came out and shone one ray of light for just a second and then disappeared again. The rain weakened by the hour, but the team still complained about the rough conditions. It was freezing outside, but Harry was determined to have a practice today.

"Why do we have to practice today?" whined Jackson.

"Because our game against Ravenclaw will probably be held under weather worse than this. We need to get use to playing in these weather conditions," Harry replied, raising his voice so the team could hear him over the loud whistles of the blowing wind.

He could barely see anything with his glasses on, not to mention without them. The rain drops kept splattering over his lenses and every now and then he needed to wipe them clean.

"We're so going to catch pneumonia," Graham said quietly, he's teeth clanking. It was hard to hear him over the loud whistles of the wind, and Harry thought he heard him adding, "I ha-hate th-this!"

"Why won't we just say we can't play? We'll fake someone's got an injury. That way, Ravenclaw will play against Hufflepuff," suggested Blaise. "I remember Flint did it three years ago with Gryffindor."

"No, we can't avoid it. Now stop acting like a bunch of babies. It'd be only one hour," Harry said.

They started practicing. Harry could barely see what was going on, but it sounded like it wasn't going well. The Chasers kept flying into each other, Draco missed the Quaffle at least five times, and Crabbe and Goyle couldn't see where they were aiming the Bludgers, as the two angry black balls started soaring in the air, almost knocking everyone off their brooms, and Harry's situation wasn't better. He never even came close to the Snitch. This is bad, Harry thought.

He called a five minute break. They all landed on the ground and headed for the changing rooms.

"Who's that?" Draco asked. He pointed to someone standing at the entrance of their changing room. The silhouetted figure held a cloak above its head, shielding itself from the rain. As Harry and his teammates got closer, a face started to be more visible. It was Hermione Granger, and Harry could only guess why she was there.

"What're you doing here, Granger?" he asked her.

"Came spying for her boyfriend about our moves, what else," Draco accused, putting on a disgusted face.

"I don't even understand Quidditch, Malfoy!" she retorted. "And not that there was much to see, anyway; even a one year old could tell you can't play at this weather!" Draco made an angry sound and walked into the changing room without another look at her.

"What do you want?" Harry asked again.

"I came to talk to you. People told me I'll find you here; you must be crazy to practice in this weather."

"I don't have the mood or the time to chat right now, Granger. I have here six people who I need to train for our next match, and I myself can't even see a damn thing with these on!" He pulled off his glasses and cleaned them with the hem of his wet sweater, only to cause them to get dirtier. He sighed in annoyance and meant to put them back on, but Hermione snatched them from his grip.

"Here, let me," she said. She pulled out her wand and tapped the glasses with it. "Impervius." She handed them back and Harry looked at her, confused. He tried them on and found that he could see.

"Hua. Thanks," he mumbled almost inaudibly, but she gave him a small smile. Harry looked at her and sighed. He knew what she wanted to talk about, and he wanted to tell her something as well, that's why he didn't tell her to leave when he saw her. He knew that if he gets himself into this now, he will never be able to concentrate on their practice today. "Look, whatever you want to tell me just do it later. I really can't right now."

"Fine, I'll wait," she said and turned around to leave. "I'll meet you at the entrance hall when you finish your practice."

Harry nodded and entered the changing room. He grabbed a towel and wiped his face dry.

"What did the Mudblood want?" Draco asked.

"Nothing," Harry replied. He then had a short talk with his team about how they should play, and it seemed to have helped a bit.

Half an hour later, Harry called the practice over. He walked back to the castle, dreading of what Granger might tell him. She probably wanted to let him know that she told Ginny he was the one who wrote the note she found.

When he entered the castle, he looked around and then spotted her, sitting on the stairs with a book open on her knees. He walked to her and when she spotted him, she stood up and put the book in her bag.

She turned around and walked up the stairs. "Come after me," she said simply. Harry walked behind her. They didn't say anything else

to each other until they reached the fourth floor and Harry saw she was heading to the library.

"Merlin, Granger, is there a day you don't come here?"

"This is the most private and quiet place I could think of. Do you have any other suggestions?" she said.

"A broom cupboard, maybe?"

She laughed lightly. "Don't be ridiculous, Potter. If Ron catches me with you in a broom cupboard, you know well enough what he will do to you."

They walked into the library. Hermione gave Madame Pince a small smile and then headed to a table in the back of the room, which was hidden behind high bookshelves. He thought it was good. That way, no one will see them together.

"But what makes you think that we can talk here without letting the mad librarian over there to kick us out for disturbing the silence of the library?" he hissed at her.

"Madame Pince isn't mad, she just misunderstood. She knows me well enough, and she trusts me. Now, sit down," Hermione indicated for him to take an empty seat while she sat in the seat across him.

"So I know you wrote the note," she said, getting straight to the point.

"Yeah, I've already realized that," he said quietly, bowing his head in shame.

"You don't have to act like that. There is nothing wrong with having feelings for someone. You too, can act like a normal human being who has emotions. You don't have to shut yourself out."

Harry looked away, staring out of the closest window and watched the sky turning dark blue while the rain kept pouring down. "If you haven't told her yet, please don't."

Hermione's voice stuttered. He could hear confusion in her voice. "You... you don't want her to know it's you?"

"No, I don't."

"But she should know," Hermione insisted. "She's out of her mind, trying to figure out who it is who wrote that note. She should know and you should tell her."

Harry let out a hollow laugh. "She's not even close, is she? She doesn't even think I might be the guy who wrote it, does she?"

Hermione didn't say anything for a moment, and Harry knew he was right. Ginny didn't care about him. "Well, maybe she just needs someone to help her get on the right track? Ginny is just so confused right now. She doesn't know what she wants. If you let me talk to her —"

"I said no," Harry said firmly. "I don't need you, Ginny or anyone to take pity on me. I don't need or want your help with this. That note was never supposed to get to her. I wanted this to be kept quiet; obviously, I failed." He sighed heavily. "Let's face it, she's not feeling the same way for me. And if you tell her it's me, she'll only be disappointed. I just wonder what Dean might say about it."

Hermione cast him a weird look. "What's Dean got to do with — Oh. Tell me you're joking," she said, as though waiting to hear him to abort what he just said.

"Joking about what?" he asked her confusedly.

"Merlin, I thought you knew!"

"Knew what? What is it?" he pressed.

Hermione clapped her hand to her mouth and started muttering to herself. "Goodness, the all school knows it for weeks, and he's still living under a rock... Dean... Ginny... They... They ended it like a month ago. At Hogsmeade. On Halloween. Right after... When you were unconscious, they got into this big row. She actually defended

you, and he wanted to know why. After that, she told him it was over and he left. She helped you wake up and tried to explain, but you didn't listen to her. I think that's what caused her to turn her back on you. She's angry because she finally realized you cared for her, but then you were all cold to her again and that's where you are now," she explained.

Harry looked horrorstruck. He ruined it, ruined everything he could have had with her. If he only just stayed back and listened to what she had to say then maybe now he wouldn't be here talking to Hermione Granger in the library, hidden from the world. He never felt more stupid in his entire life, and he cursed himself for his stupidity.

He bore his face in his hands and then slammed his palm hard on the table, causing Hermione to jump.

A long moment has passed before she spoke again. "I – I want to help you..." she said tentatively. Her voice was soft and he never heard her talk to him with that tone.

Harry shook his head. "Yeah, I know. I've got serious problems, I need help. All the shrinks and healers didn't help before, but I've got the feeling you can make some progress with me," he said half-sarcastically, half-seriously.

Hermione had no clue what he was talking about. She decided she'd best forget it and explain herself. "No, I meant helping you with Ginny."

Harry's head rose up at once. Slowly, he started chuckling silently. "You – Want to help – Me – With Ginny?"

"Yes," she said seriously. "I do."

"But you hate me. I hate you."

"If you hate me, than why are you here talking to me?" she challenged, crossing her hands over her chest and leaning back in her chair, watching him fumbling for words.

He opened his mouth several times to respond, but couldn't find anything to say to that. She was quite right, he didn't hate her. He didn't really have a reason to. She on the other hand, should hate him, for all the horrible things he had done and said to her.

"Why do you want to help me?"

"Because this situation is exhausting the two of you. You're too stubborn and she's too blind. If you let me help, we might fix this. She cares for you, I know she does. Otherwise, why did she break up with Dean because of you? Why did she care enough to help you wake up that day? Why did she say you kissed better than him?"

Harry's eyes lit up and his heart jumped all the way to his brains. "She said that?"

Hermione nodded. "Hua-hua. Let me help you."

But Harry looked over to the window again; doesn't know if he should believe the things she said. Again, he was feeling like he should back off and give up. This phase will eventually fade away. "But it's not worth it. She's in her own perfect world, where I don't even exist."

Hermione moved to another chair in order to catch his look. "Ginny insists on staying in denial when she's not one hundred percent believing what she feels or what is the truth, but if you flash it in front of her eyes, she'll realize that she was wrong."

Harry wanted to believe her. She was saying all those comforting things to him. For the first time ever since he realized he fancied Ginny, he had someone to talk to openly about it, and it made him feel more relieved. She understood how he felt and what he was going through. She wanted to help him get Ginny, but then something still didn't seem to make sense. "And why do you want to help me? What will you get from it?"

"Well, if my plan works, you and Ginny get together and hopefully be happy. What I get from is just your kindness. Instead of saying 'Get lost, Mudblood'" – she said it in a fake, low and manly voice – "you

could just say 'Hello.' You know, as a sign of gratitude for what I did for you."

"I guess I can do that," he said quietly. "But what if your plan won't work? Or why would she even want me? I already tried getting her attention, it didn't work. I blew it long time ago, when I first had a chance. All she thinks when she sees me is 'What is this Death Eater want from me now?'"

Hermione didn't give up. She could see he had a very low self esteem when it came to girls, and she wanted to fix it for him. "Okay, first of all, you can count on me that my plan will work. I know Ginny and I know what I'm doing, so just trust me on this. Secondly, trying to get her attention by being rough on her isn't the way to do it. You need to be gentle, to know what she wants. I'll help you there, don't worry. And lastly, nobody, not even Ginny, still thinks you're a Death Eater. We all know the truth now."

"Well, then it could have been nice to apologize," Harry spat, suddenly feeling angry. "Now you know the truth, but you did think I was one at first, did you? If I hadn't showed it to everyone, you would probably still believe those rumors."

Hermione's flushed a very faint color of pink. "Okay, I admit it, I misjudged you, but it was really only because Ron said you threatened him, and then there were all these scenarios that he pointed out to me. It was pretty convincing after he said you were casting a Confundus Charm on Professor Lupin and he acted like nothing happened." Harry looked at her with his mouth agape. So that's what he thought I'd done. She saw his mortified look, and she hurried to explain. "But then, at the Dueling Club we realized! We realized we were wrong about you, and it was all just a big misunderstanding." She exhaled heavily, because she almost forgot to breathe. "I'm really sorry. I should have said it before, but I really am truly sorry."

Harry sat quietly for a moment, going through what she just told him. "When did I threaten him?" he finally asked, after a long pause. "I was only joking at first; I wasn't seriously going to use an Unforgivable Curse on him. Why would he say I threatened him?"

"He said you told him not to tell anyone about what he saw in Lupin's classroom or else, you'd be upset."

"Okay, I find this whole thing quite ironic, because he swore to me he didn't tell you about that when he actually did, but it wasn't a threat. I only said it so he won't tell Ginny whatever he came up with, because then I really will be upset, in case she believed whatever he'd say to her! He must have misunderstood me, is all."

Hermione looked at him apologetically. "Well, I didn't know that. I guess things have gotten out of hand, haven't they?"

"Yeah, I guess so..." he said quietly.

For the first time in what must have been like two hours, a long silence fell between them. Harry realized it wasn't weird at all to talk to her. All those years he mistook her, thinking the same as his friends were thinking, calling her names because she wasn't like them, but in fact she was more like him, and she must have suffered all those years because of him.

"So what will your boyfriend say if he finds out you were talking to me and helping me get his sister behind his back?" Harry asked.

"Oh, he'll probably freak out and get really mad at me, but eventually forgive me because he loves me. Then again, Ron and I have always shared different opinions about almost everything."

The library was now closing, and he and Hermione got up to leave. They were the last people except Madame Pince who stayed there. Dinner was now being served in the Great Hall, and Harry was in a particularly good mood now, thanks to her. They descended the stairs to the Great Hall together, no one was in sight to see them talking to each other.

"God, I need a smoke," Harry said suddenly. That must have caught Hermione off guard, for that she turned to look at him with her eyebrows raised. "I used to smoke, something like three years ago when I was too stupid to notice it. Then my parents caught me and

that was the end of it. I just have the need to have one right now. There's too much going on, too much pressure."

"Don't worry, it will all be over soon. Now, what you really need to start doing is to think of a Christmas gift for Ginny."

"I beg you pardon?" Harry looked at her as though she'd gone mad.

She went on, as if she hadn't heard him. "I recommend you buy her something nice, but not too fancy. Try to think of something she will like. Oh, don't look at me like that. I think it'd be a good thing to start with. Keep it as a secret for the meanwhile. Just think of it, Secret Santa," she added mysteriously once they reached the entrance hall and she hurried to the Great Hall.

"Hey, Granger," he said before she went through the doors. She turned around and looked at him. "I just wanted to say thank you and that I'm sorry, for everything I did to you."

She nodded and smiled kindly. "Apology accepted."

Harry suddenly felt an enormous weight lifting off his shoulders. Now he has to figure out what Granger meant by the 'Secret Santa' comment.

It was Saturday morning, and it finally stopped raining. The air, however, was still cold outside and wild winds were still blowing occasionally, so Harry, Draco and Blaise stayed at their dormitory, where a nice, warm fire was burning in the small hearth of the room. As there was a last Hogsmeade trip before the holiday, they decided to go to the village later that day.

Right now, Draco was lying in bed, reading the previous day's paper. Blaise was tossing a paper ball he made from his unsatisfactory Transfiguration homework back and forth at the wall with his wand, and Harry was making a list of suggestions for gifts he could buy Ginny for Christmas.

Right now he had a sheet of paper only full of doodles of little stick people which were meant to be him and Ginny kissing. He couldn't think of anything to get her, but knew there had to be at least one

thing she would like. After a few minutes of racking his brains and finding nothing, he had the courage to ask some help.

"Say, Blaise. If you were a girl, what would you want me to get you for Christmas?"

Blaise turned and look at him with a puzzled look on his face. "Are you implying something or is there a redhead girl you want to get a Christmas gift for?"

Harry couldn't help but gave him a smile and he felt himself blush from the neck to the roots of his hair. "The latter," he admitted. He got used to the fact that Blaise and Draco didn't care he liked Ginny, as long he didn't brag too much over it, like Blaise did with his crush on Pansy.

Blaise played along, leaning against the headboard of his bed. "Well, okay. Assuming I'm a redhead girl who also likes Quidditch, I would have wanted the new broom on the market, Tearing Tiger. ROAR!"

Harry burst out laughing at the imitation of Blaise roaring and holding his hands like Tiger's claws. "Yeah, problem is I only have like 10 Galleons worth allowance that I saved for the last six months and I need to buy presents for seven people. Maybe I'll get her a scarf or a hat or some other rubbish girls like."

"Jewelry," Draco said from his bed. Harry turned to look at him. His face was still hidden behind the paper. "You might consider buying her a jewel or something. That's what girls like."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, Draco, I have a low budget," Harry said a bit louder, as if to make it clear to Draco what he was saying.

"I did hear you, but there an advertisement here for a new jewelry store down in Hogsmeade. They're having a special offer for the holiday, really low prices on everything in the store," he said, finally moving the newspaper off his face.

"Let me see that," Harry said, taking the paper from him. He looked at the ad and saw the pictures of all kinds of beautiful jewels. The prices

flashed in and out of the frame. The prices were indeed low compared to other jewelry stores, and Harry thought it would be a great idea to stop there later and buy something for Ginny.

"Hey, what's that?" said Blaise suddenly. He was sitting on the carpet now and had the paper in his hands. He looked concerned over the front page. "Draco, did you look at this? Your father is mentioned here."

Harry and Draco swooped next to Blaise as he laid the paper on the floor. The front page of the Daily Prophet bore the headlines: MASSIVE DEATH EATERS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN! "This is yesterday's paper. I just got around to look at it," Draco commented. They all began to read quietly.

Last night Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, had confirmed to the press that Azkaban prison had a breakout of no more than seven convicted Death Eaters. This is the first time anyone ever succeeded breaking out of Azkaban.

The Ministry right now has no idea how seven Death Eaters managed to escape from the Dementors guarding the prison. The scene is now investigated by expert Aurors.

However that, the Ministry does have speculations that Lucius Malfoy, a respectable known wizard, who was also suspected to be a Death Eater more than a decade ago, but got off when proved his claim that he had been under the effect of the Imperious Curse before You-Know-Who's big downfall, was behind the whole incident. Malfoy right now is suspiciously missing. Aurors and Dementors have been placed by his home.

Fudge did not want to elaborate on what else the Ministry's forces are doing at the moment, and if indeed Malfoy had anything to do with the breakout, but a source within the Ministry, who wished to remain unnamed, has told us that it was hard not to see that Malfoy is planning to get back at Sirius Black for killing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named for fifteen years now, and was only waiting for the right time to strike. "It's obvious Mr. Malfoy is trying to gather as much power as he can. He's probably one of the few people who know where Black

is hiding and he's about to do something about it. With the help of the escaped Death Eaters, Malfoy is at large at the moment and very dangerous. No one can predict how he managed to help them escape, where they are all hiding and when they will strike. Fudge is extremely worried about the public's safety, but yet trying to stay calm."

At the press conference last night, Fudge agreed to say the names of the escaping Death Eaters, "This is a warning for each and every one of you. If any of you see the following, please alert the Ministry of Magic immediately: Rodolphus Lestrangle, Rabastan Lestrangle, Bellatrix Lestrangle, Walden McNair, Bartemius Crouch Jr., Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood. These witches and wizards are extremely dangerous. Please be careful until an official announcement of their captures will be released."

For more information on Sirius Black and Lucius Malfoy, please read page 4, columns 2 and 3.

At the bottom of the article was a row of pictures which held the names of the escaping Death Eaters along with the word 'Wanted' above each photo, and at the center of the page were two more pictures. The first was of Lucius Malfoy, sneering at the camera, the other of a very young version of his godfather. Harry never seen Sirius so young, but he noticed his spirit never changed. The Sirius in the picture, 15 years younger, was winking at the camera from time to time and holding a huge grin on his face.

After finishing looking at the paper, Harry looked over at Draco. His head was bowed, his fist clutched tightly and he had a dark expression on his face. Harry wasn't feeling so cheerful himself. He knew that meant that he and his parents need to be really careful right now, more than everyone, and he wouldn't be surprised if they needed to go back into hiding.

Draco got up without saying a word and left the room, closing the door to their dormitory quietly, as if not to disturb anyone on such a quiet Sunday morning. Harry and Blaise exchanged worried looks. Harry at least, would expect him to burst out and get really upset, but the serenity in Draco's behavior was quiet disturbing.

"What do you reckon will happen this Christmas?" Blaise asked in a hushed voice.

Harry sighed. His eyes drifted back to the photo of Draco's father in the paper. "I don't know. Let's just hope it will be a happy one, for all of us."

The Great Hall was decorated in its usual holiday decorations and the twelve giant Christmas trees. The enchantment ceiling of the Hall reflected the snowy weather outside and gave the feeling as though the light white flakes were falling into the castle.

Harry had done all his Christmas shopping that afternoon in Hogsmeade and spent the rest of the day in the Three Broomsticks, drinking butterbeer with Draco and Blaise. Draco seemed to be feeling a bit more cheerful since that morning, but Blaise and Harry knew there was something he was trying to hide. They weren't sure how Draco's Christmas would be, with just him and his mother alone at their big mansion, whereas his father was still missing along with the other escaped Death Eaters, which none of them had been caught yet.

The thing that sucked the most was that neither of them could invite Draco to spend Christmas with them. Blaise was leaving with his parents to his relatives in Ireland, and Harry's parents will never let him get into the house, especially with the current situation with Draco's father, and Sirius being at their home.

Later that evening, right before dinner, Harry had a little chat with Professor Lupin, who told him he would be taking him to his parents and spend the Christmas with them like it was planned.

"You can spend the train ride with your friends," he said. "And when we get off in London, you'll join me."

Harry was sitting in Lupin's office, in front of his desk, with Lupin was sitting on the other side. "Are we going into hiding?" he dared to ask. He was afraid of asking the question and the answer he would get in return. He didn't want to go into hiding. He wanted things to be

normal, where Sirius could walk down the street freely, without fears that a Death Eater would catch him, and not in his Animagi form, and where all the Death Eaters are locked behind bars in Azkaban, and where his friends didn't need to worry about anything but school exams.

"I really don't know, Harry," Lupin replied sincerely. "Could be, could not. I guess we'll have to wait and see. Professor Dumbledore said he will let us all know when would be the right time to do that. He still thinks you're safe when you are, and that there is nothing to worry about."

"Even with the breakout from Azkaban?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, even with the breakout. Your house, Harry, is very guarded place. Both of your parents are Aurors, and they trust Dumbledore. You do trust Dumbledore, don't you?"

"Well, yes. I guess..." he said quietly. He remembered how his parents always praised Dumbledore for being the greatest wizard in the world.

Harry looked down at his Professor's desk and sighed heavily. Then, his eyes spotted a familiar yellow parchment, which was lying open on the desk. Lots of black dots were moving there, and Harry leaned forward to catch a better glance at it, with Lupin watching him questioningly.

"Is that the parchment that I gave you on Halloween?" Harry asked with curiosity, not noticing that he's prying. "Is it really a map?"

"Yes it is," Lupin replied with a light note in his voice. "It's not just a map; it's the Marauder's Map."

Harry looked up at him and raised his eyebrows in surprised. "You mean you, Sirius and my dad did that?" he asked with wonderment.

Of course he knew all about the time when his father and his friends called themselves Marauders. He spent years hearing all kinds of

funny stories they did while being at school, and he recalled he once heard about a map, which Filch confiscated during their sixth year.

Lupin nodded. "Yes, along with Peter," he said. Harry's face soured at the mention of the traitor's name. Lupin didn't seem to notice it and continued, "I don't know how it got into your hands, Harry, but I ought to let your father and Sirius see it again. It has been such a long time since we last seen it."

"What does it do exactly?" Harry queried.

"Well, it's a map of Hogwarts. It shows where everyone is at this moment, and all the secret passages that we knew about," Lupin explained.

Harry wrinkled a brow. "What secret passages?"

At that, Lupin must have noticed he said something Harry shouldn't have known. "The ones that your mother will kill me if I'll tell you about." Harry let out a small chuckle.

Lupin then reached to map, ready to roll it up, when he suddenly stopped and looked at the map intensely, and his face paling in an instant. Harry watched him swallow hard and get to his feet, his hands shaking.

"Harry, I – There's something that came up," he said rashly, still staring at the map with the same stunned face. "I'll see you later. Let yourself out, okay?"

And before Harry could ask what was wrong, Lupin was out of his office, running down the hallway, the Marauder's Map still clutched in his hands. Harry wasn't sure what exactly caused this sudden change in his Professor's behavior, but was sure it was none of his business, so he left the office, only to remember his own concerns. He was concerned about Draco, and about his family, and one of his biggest concerns was if Ginny will like the present he got her or not?

So after dinner, he waited for Granger outside the Great Hall. He wanted to ask her what she thought of it. He still couldn't believe

himself he was on speaking terms with her, but she wanted to help him and he really needed her help. As she left the Great Hall, she was walking along with the two Weasleys. Now how he was supposed to get her alone without making it look suspicious?

Without thinking much, he called her and said the first thing that came to his mind before they will disappear up the staircase to Gryffindor Tower.

"Oy, Granger!" he yelled. The three Gryffindors spun around. Ron's expression changed in a second to a scowl. Harry's stomach lurched as Ginny's eyes narrowed when she spotted him, but Hermione's features stayed natural. "Umm... Professor Snape... he... he asked me to call you to his office."

Hermione made a move to come down the stairs when Ron stopped her. "Whatever for?" he asked him sharply.

"Honestly, Ronald! It's going to be fine," Hermione said to him with a roll of her eyes. "Stop being too protective of everyone." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek before coming down and joining Harry to the direction of the dungeons.

As they reached the dark dungeons, Harry pulled her behind a suit of armor. "I feel like we're sneaking around to snog," he muttered. He looked around carefully to see nobody was around, and then pulled out of his pocket a red velvet box in a shape of a heart, opened it and showed her the necklace he picked for Ginny. "What do you think?" he asked.

It was a silver chain with three pearls. The one in the middle was big and pink, while the two on either side of it were white, but smaller.

"Oh, it's lovely," she said, leaning down to the red box to examine the necklace more closely. "Is that real silver?"

"Yes. The pearls are real, too." Then he murmured, "Do you think she'll like it?"

"If she won't, then she's a fool," Hermione replied with a snicker. "This must have cost you a lot."

"Yeah, pretty much..." Harry's voice trailed off. "Well, she deserves something nice, right?"

Harry looked up to see her smiling fondly at him. "Don't do that," he said icily, before she'll sigh or say "Awww!"

Hermione raised her hands in defeat. "Haven't done anything," she said innocently. "So, have you decided what you're writing her on the card?"

"I need to write a card?" Harry said in surprise. All this time he was busy thinking of buying something nice for Ginny, that he totally forgot he also needed to write her a card.

Hermione cast him a pointed look. "Every Christmas present should have a card from the sender."

"But I thought you said I should keep it a secret for the meanwhile?"

"I did, but that doesn't mean you don't need to write a card," she said. "I would love to help you there as well, but I think it should be personal and come from the heart."

Hermione then handed him the necklace and walked off up the stairs, back to the entrance hall.

That night it was the last night before it was time to leave for the holiday. After Harry was all packed up and ready to head to bed, he finally found the time to write Ginny her card. It was around one in the morning, but he didn't care.

From the few cards he bought to everyone, he found just the one he thought looked nice on the wrap of the necklace box. It had two little snowpersons on the front, which were holding their stick hands together, and snowflakes in shapes of tiny hearts were falling around them.

An hour later, when he thought he had finished and came with a good result, he suddenly remembered he needed to sign it. Well, of course he couldn't write his name if it was suppose to be anonymous. He finally came up with something that he had heard a few days back and thought it was perfect. When he was finished, he put it on the golden wrapping of her gift and hid at the bottom of his trunk, and went to sleep.

The morning after had arrived too quickly and Harry never thought he will relive a déjà vu like he was having at the moment.

He was having trouble waking up again, but of course, being sunken deep with sleep, he didn't realize it until someone was giggling like an eight-year-old school girl and something was poking his right cheek annoyingly. Harry slapped it away, but the giggling only went stronger. There were also sounds of clicking and flashes of light, which Harry had no clue in his state of slumber what exactly caused them.

"Mmwha!" a squeaky voice said along with other kissing noises. "Hawwy musht wake up because he's shoooo gownna be late for the twain," it said in a mock baby voice.

"Go'way," Harry groaned, hiding his head now under the pillow. "I don't wanna get up."

"Hawwy, I lurve you!" the annoying voice said happily, and Harry heard more giggling.

"Leavemealone!"

"But Hawwy, I luuuurve you!" The annoying thing kept poking his cheek, even underneath the pillow it found its target, and made those stupid kissing noises.

"Blaise, I swear I'm going to kill you if I get up!" he threatened sleepily, half aware of what was going on. It was the same story all over again, only this time Harry wished he won't get showered unwillingly. He just didn't have the strength to get up and get ready. He was too tired and wished to sleep a bit more.

"I'm not Blaise, Harry. Don't you recognize me? I thought you loved me, Harry. It's me, Ginny," said the voice, which now was unsuccessfully trying to imitate a girl's voice.

"Argh..."

"Let me try..." whispered someone, Harry was falling back to sleep and didn't care who it was.

His shelter pillow was lifted off his head and he groaned again. "Hiya, stud," suddenly whispered a soft, sexy, feminine voice in his ear, which Harry's too clouded with sleep mind still knew that Blaise could never in the world make it sound so perfect. It reminded him so much of Ginny. Was she really there? No, she couldn't be. Could she? Oh, what a perfect dream he's having...

"Ginny...?" Harry mumbled softly, and opened one eyelid, expecting to see the beautiful freckled face of Ginny Weasley, but instead finding none other than the doggish features of Pansy Parkinson smiling brightly at him.

"Argh!" Harry yelled, and in less than a second he was at the other end of the bed, clutching his sheets closely to his body and hiding any uncovered part from Pansy's prying eyes.

A good wave of laughter erupted around the room. There, right in front of his bed stood his two best friends. Draco was struggling to breathe, a camera in his hands. He obviously just took another picture, as Harry saw he already had a bunch of them scattered on the floor. Next to him was Blaise, holding his stomach and rolling with laughter. His hand was dressed with the most repelling sock puppet Harry had ever seen. It had full red lips at the front, and drawn black eyes with long eyelashes. So that what was kissing him...

"Gross..." Harry mumbled. "You probably got your germs and flees all over my beddings now!" he complained bitterly to Pansy, sweeping with his hand invisible germs off his blanket, where she sat a moment before.

"Oh, it's okay for us to share spit, but not for me to sit next to you?" she asked, her eyebrows raised and arms folded together.

"Please don't remind me of that horrible incident, it's a scar for life!"

"May I remind you, Potter, that you kissed me," she said, sounding a bit offended now.

Harry groaned. "I was probably drunk, then," he said. How did he even get into the situation of kissing Pansy, he totally forgot. Ginny. It was all because of her. "What are you doing here, anyway? It's the boys' dormitories."

Pansy put on her face a confident smile and said, "Well, Draco and Blaise came for my assistance when they couldn't wake you up. We had quite a show here with Ms. Puppet that Blaise made," she said, referring to the ugly sock puppet Blaise was now taking off his hand, "and took a few pictures." She then threw the last picture Draco took at Harry's lap. "Anyways, guys. I'm going. Got to make some last minute packings. See you on the train," she said and walked out of their dorm room.

Harry glanced down at the picture now sitting on his bed. He was too scared to even look at it. He simply grabbed it forcefully and crumpled it into a ball.

"I-want-those-pictures-destroyed!" he said through clenched teeth, and before he managed to launch himself at the pile of the other pictures on the floor, Blaise held him back, while Draco picked them up.

"Na-uh," Draco said. "This is for bribery," he said, amused, while he waved them at him, as if it they were saying goodbye to him and it was the last time he was ever going to see them. "You see, Blaise and I thought we'll show it to your precious Ginny in case you won't cancel the game against Ravenclaw after Christmas. I'm sure the Weaslette will love to see them. How many times did he say her name last night, Blaise?"

Blaise made his all-so-famous thinking face. "Umm... six, if I'm not mistaken."

Harry's face was all red from embarrassment. "I was not talking in my sleep!" he insisted.

"Yes you were, and it was so damn hilarious!" Blaise countered.

Harry was tired listening to this. He was now fully awake, and he needed to get ready to leave and have a proper breakfast first. "Fine, whatever," he said lamely. "But I'm not canceling the game! We're playing after Christmas and that is it! And I don't care who you'll show those pictures to. By all means, be my guest."

Honestly, he did care if they'll show it to Ginny, but he knew all too well that she wouldn't care about it at all. He wasn't one of her concerns, so why should she care about him?

Dean, Neville, Colin and Michael. Dean, Neville, Colin and Michael. Those four names ran through Ginny's head over and over again. She was trying to figure out who could be this mystery guy who wrote her 'The Ghost Note', as she called it lately, because it seemed like neither one of them was him.

She started to point it out to herself, and even written it down in a list.

Dean, her last boyfriend. She was the one who broke up with him. He tried to get together with her. They were together for nearly five months. Problem was that she knew his handwriting too well to know that it didn't match the writing on the note.

Colin, as she was told by Luna, always seemed to be around her because he fancies her. She had the courage to come and ask him if he write her the note, but he swore it wasn't him. She knew he was being honest with her, so he was immediately off the list.

Next was Neville, whom she'd been told not too long ago that he fancied her, but lately she'd seen him around Susan Bones, and Hermione made a note that they were indeed an item, so he couldn't be the one.

And lastly was Michael, her first boyfriend. They were only together for a short while and it was over six months since their breakup, so if it was him, why hadn't he said anything, or why did he remember to let it out now? She could just imagine him laughing at her face when she'll ask him about it, so she was left with nothing.

Or did she?

He couldn't possibly... she thought. No, not him. This is ridiculous! Harry Potter couldn't be her mystery guy!

Or could he...?

The train station at Hogsmeade was packed with students. Harry's neck was starting to hurt from craning over their heads, in try to spot Ginny's red hair. All of it was to nothing. He just couldn't find her.

Right when he was about to give in, he heard a familiar voice, talking fast and in a tone of annoyance. He knew that whenever he heard Hermione Granger's voice, Ron Weasley was with her, probably arguing and is the reason why she sounded annoyed, and usually, wherever Ron went, Ginny came after him.

Harry was right about that.

Hermione and Ron were dragging their trunks to the station, having just got off their horseless carriage. They were too busy arguing about what sounded like homework they had gotten for the break, to notice that Ginny was looking unfocused, barely managing to make her way through the crowd as she walked slackly behind them. She bumped into a few people and almost dropped her trunk twice, but then, she stopped, finally snapping out of her daze as she said goodbye to a few friends that passed her by.

Harry thought it was the best time to give her the gift. But how could he do it without even approaching her?

He spotted a first year and grabbed him by the shoulder. The kid squeaked with a start, but Harry quickly shushed him. "Want to make a few Sickles?" he asked the boy. He looked up at Harry as though

he went crazy, but Harry stuck his hand into his robe's pocket and took out a small bag with ten silver Sickles he was left as change from his Christmas shopping. "You want them?"

The boy looked up at him and nodded eagerly, his eyes glinting at the small bag in Harry's hands. Harry smiled in satisfaction. He led him to a far corner and when he was sure no one was looking at them, he took Ginny's gift out of his bag, all wrapped up nicely, and handed it to him. He bent down to match his eye level and then pointed out Ginny. "You see that girl with the red hair?" he asked. The boy nodded again vigorously. "You take that gift and give it to her. If she asks you who gave it to you, don't say anything or point to me, is that clear?" Another excited nod. "If you tell her who you got it from, not even one coin for you, got it?"

"Yeah," he said in his squeaky voice.

Harry got up on his feet and pushed him forward. "Good. Now go."

He watched him run to Ginny and then tugging the end of her scurf from behind. She turned around and looked down at him. The boy simply gave her the gift, and Harry could see she was amazed to receive it. He could read her lips, saying 'Who gave you this?' but he just shrugged and disappeared into the crowd. Neither Ginny nor Harry could see him, and Harry thought he had done a great job, because if he would have come back straight to him, his cover would have been exposed right away.

Ginny was still surprised to receive the gift. Harry could see her staring at it and examining it closely. She then noticed the card, and quickly opened it. A minute after, her mouth opened speechlessly and Harry felt satisfied with himself. He knew he was blushing a little, and did his best to hide it.

Someone pecked him on the back. He turned around to see the small boy waiting for him with a small grin on his lips, and his hand already stretch forward. Harry, as promised, gave him the small bag of money and the kid disappeared from sight before Harry managed to say: "Nice doing business with you."

Ginny walked slowly behind Ron and Hermione into an empty compartment they found. They all sat down as the train started to move.

Ron found it suddenly rather weird that she was too quiet all morning. He turned to see her staring at a package in her hands, wrapped with shiny red and gold paper.

"Hey, where did you get that from?" he asked her.

"Some first year kid gave it to me..." she said softly, barely paying attention. Her eyes were still focused on the card.

Hermione moved next to her and looked at the card. "Same handwriting," she whispered.

"I know," Ginny said. "You don't think that kid –"

"What? No!" Hermione dismissed. "How is it possible that a first year will have such curved and neat handwriting? And write such beautiful words? No way."

"I guess you're right," Ginny said quietly.

Ron cleared his throat, as if to let them know he was still there. "Am I missing something?"

"Ginny has a secret admirer," Hermione said cheerfully.

"A secret admirer?" Ron asked, almost not believing. He started to chuckle. "No way! Do you know who it is?"

"Probably Dean," Ginny replied. "It must be him."

Would she force herself to believe it is Dean? Will she be disappointed to find out if it weren't him? Ginny couldn't answer those questions because Hermione interrupted her before she could think it over.

"Well, come on, open it! I want to see what you got!" she said keenly.

Ginny tore the shiny wrapping and discovered a red velvet box in a shape of a heart. She slowly opened it and gasped when she finally saw what was inside. It was a beautiful silver necklace with three magnificent pearls. The minute she saw it, her heart softened. She loved it. It must have cost him quite a lot, she thought. Whoever he is. She knew she must find out who is it.

She immediately put it on; blocking the comments Ron threw at her at that. And she couldn't stop reading the card. It was too beautiful to take her eyes off it, same as the necklace. Word for word, she read and reread it, until she memorized it by heart.

Dear Ginny,

I was sitting and thinking what I should write to you, it was a hard task to come up with words.

All what came to my mind were Happy Christmas and a Happy New Year, but I knew it wasn't enough.

Not for you.

You mean to me much more, so I thought that maybe it was time that I should let my creative side (If I have one) to take over.

I wish you this year to be happy, to be loved. To be grateful that you have healthy life and that you are safe.

To know that I'm here thinking about you all the time.

I hope you like my gift, as I spent hours thinking if it will suit you well. A pretty neck like yours deserves to wear something nice.

So finally- Happy Christmas!

Yours truly,

Your Secret Santa.

Right then, Ginny knew she wanted to meet him. No matter who he was, she would accept him.

A/N: Please review! I worked really hard on this chapter. The next two or three are going to be quite important to the story. I've been really looking forward to writing them.

Chapter 14 – Christmas Surprises:

As evening enfolded the sky with navy blue velvet, the train started to slow down. Harry watched outside the window the tiny, shimmering lights of London growing brighter by the moment. Soft snowflakes were falling, casting a smooth layer of white onto the pavements and rooftops. It was apparent that Christmas spirit was already in the air.

"Guess we should get up," Blaise said, as he saw people strolling down the train. He started to gather his belongings. "My parents are picking me up. We're Flooing straight to Ireland from the Leaky Cauldron to my Aunt Philly," he said as he fastened his cloak tighter.

Harry got up as well. "I need to wait for Professor Lupin to take me home. That is, if I'm going home..." he added glumly.

The two of them started to get ready to leave; only Draco remained seated, looking sullenly out of the window. Blaise eyed Harry awkwardly, and Harry sat next to him quietly.

"Your mum's coming, isn't she?" he asked him.

Draco's body tensed up and his face stiffened. He barely said a word since they left Hogwarts, which to Harry's great disappointment, made the train ride less fun than he had wanted it to be. Draco let out a small sigh before he got up as well and pulled his trunk off the luggage rack.

"It's going to be okay, Draco," Harry continued, trying to sound.

"Yeah, we'll see," he replied with a dark tone in his voice.

Harry knew what he was thinking. It would never be okay from now on. His father was on the run from the Ministry's Aurors after he helped at least seven Death Eaters escape from Azkaban. Nothing would be the same again.

But Harry had no idea what else to say to his friend. He guessed that if it were him in the same situation, he would have acted the same way. Draco was trying to enjoy life, school and friends, but lately, the

relationship he had with his father was unsettled and made him become moody and depressed most of the time.

The train finally came to a halt, and Draco quickly muttered a faint "Happy Christmas" before leaving Blaise and Harry alone in their compartment without even glancing at them once. Harry had the feeling he was holding himself from bursting into tears of fury, as he sensed earlier a broken tone in his voice and noticed his eyes begin to swell and redden.

"Poor fellow," Blaise whispered, and Harry couldn't agree more.

They got off the train, onto the platform and started looking around for a familiar face. "Oh, there's my mum. I'm gone. See you after Christmas, Harry." Blaise waved Harry off and went to join his family.

Harry found himself alone, where all the students around him were joining their parents on the platform. He started to search for Lupin, but it was impossible to see anything among all the witches and wizards around him. He also wished he could have had a last glance at Ginny before Christmas, but he couldn't find her, either.

Suddenly, he heard Lupin's voice calling him from behind. "Harry! Over here!"

Harry turned around and saw his Professor waving at him over a crowd of heads. Harry dragged his trunk over to him, glad he finally found him.

"Ready to go?" Lupin asked. He looked exhausted, more than usual, anyway. The train ride probably wore him out, because the next full moon was only a week away.

"Er – yeah. How are we getting there?" He wondered why he didn't consider it before.

Professor Lupin gave him a small, reassuring smile. "Your parents arranged us a Ministry car," he replied. He led him through the magic barrier in the wall between platforms nine and ten. Despite the strange looks they received from some Muggles who were around,

they walked casually out to the snow-covered Muggle street, where an old-fashioned dark green car waited for them. A driver wearing an emerald green velvet suit was sitting by the steering wheel.

About thirty minutes later, they arrived to a small village, which was almost hidden behind a forest just as small, just a bit south of London. They pulled right in front of a two level cottage house, which was right at the centre of the village. To Harry, Godric's Hollow was a convenient, quiet place to live in, and even though it was packed with Muggles and his family was one of the only few wizarding families that resided there, he loved living there.

The evergreen trees he used to see all through his summer holidays were now covered with a thick layer of pure, white snow. The houses around had been ornamented with all kinds of tiny, colorful lights and Christmas ornaments.

They got out of the car, and Lupin started to drag their trunks to the front door, while Harry took his broom in one hand and Hedwig's cage in the other and carried them to the entrance as well.

They got inside quickly and put all their things by the door and closed it quietly. Harry started to sweep the snowflakes off his cloak and then hung it on the coat-hanger, while Lupin walked into the living room. Harry heard him call, "James? Lily? We're here!"

Harry looked around the house, where Christmas decorations were already hung everywhere. It sure was pretty looking. It looked like his parents really put a lot of effort to make it look nice this year. But other than the Christmas decorations, Harry didn't see anything, or rather anyone else in the house. Where had his parents gone? Did they have last minute Christmas shopping to do? Or did something happen to them and Lucius Malfoy was here and already captured them?

Harry's head started to spin around as worries and concerns overflowed him again, and he couldn't help but start to panic.

A second later, he let out a long sigh of relief as he heard his mother's familiar giggling coming from the kitchen. Why didn't he

bother to look first, before coming up with suggestions? He cursed himself for his overreaction.

He walked over there, pushing open the kitchen door to greet his parents, but instead of walking in to let them know he was home, he quickly spun around and swore under his breath at the sight of the two of them snogging under mistletoe his father was holding in midair over their heads, with his wand.

"Merlin, you two are disgusting!" Harry commented as he strode back to the living room and slumped down on the couch, helping himself to a ginger cookie from a plate that was placed on the small coffee table.

A few seconds later, James and Lily walked in, very red faced. Lupin, who was reading a magazine in the armchair by the fire, looked up and saw their messy appearances and started chuckling as he realized what happened. "You walked in on them?" he asked Harry, amused.

Harry groaned. "Yes, and believe me, no child should see his parents snogging like they did just now." He threw them a very disgusted look. "Hello. I'm home," he said to them, as though it wasn't obvious.

Lily quickly recovered from her embarrassment. She walked over to her son, sat next to him on the couch and leaned to kiss him on the cheek. "Hello honey. I'm sorry about before. We didn't hear you come in."

Harry pulled his face away from her. "Mum!" he whined, wiping his cheek. Honestly, what was she thinking? He was bloody sixteen years old, not four!

Lily ignored him. "How was your trip home?" she asked, interested.

"Fine," he replied with a shrug. He took another bite to his cookie, before his mother snatched it from his hand and put it on the table. "Hey, I was eating that!" he complained.

"No, you're not. Dinner is in less than half an hour. I don't want you to stuff yourself with cookies!" she scolded, and stood up. "And no

shoes on the sofa, please," she said, throwing his feet off the armrest and onto the carpet. "Thank you."

Harry watched her walk vigorously back to the kitchen, where ham and chicken pie scents filled the air. He then turned his head suddenly to his father, who was sitting next to Lupin. "You got her pregnant, didn't you?" he said flatly.

James looked shocked by his son's remark. His mouth fell open. "Wha – Of course I didn't! Why will you say that?"

"Well, I guess we all noticed the mood swings," said a voice from the door. Harry looked up and saw Sirius there, chewing on a blueberry muffin. "Cupcakes are in the kitchen, if you want some, Harry," he said with a wink.

"Hey Sirius!" Harry said brightly, his mood changing the instant he saw his godfather.

"Whoa – Wait a minute!" James called, holding his hands in front of him as to stop all happenings. His voice turned into a whisper. "Lily is not pregnant. I think I would've known if she were, thank you very much. Besides, we aren't thinking of having more children."

"Good, because I'd hate you if you were. I'm happy being an only child," Harry said, retrieving his cookie from the table and stuffing it in his mouth.

Sirius walked in and sat on the carpet, next to James's feet. "So James, how do you explain her ambition for perfection lately? I noticed the house looks a lot cleaner and tidier. And the food –" he took another mouthful bite from his muffin, "– Hmm... delicious!"

Harry suddenly choked on his own cookie and tried to swallow hard. Lupin patted him hard on the back to help him, and when he was able to breathe again, he said. "You mean you didn't buy these?" he asked disbelievingly, referring to the very tasty cookies. "Mum actually made them?"

Lily Potter was known as the worst cook in the world. It came to situations where the fried chicken shrank to the size of an egg, or where the soup came out dark green and crusty, or even where the chocolate pie tasted as completely different than what was also brown, as Sirius once said...

So that was one of the reasons why Harry couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts every summer, he wouldn't suffer his mum's cooking for months and have a delicious meal three times a day.

"She did," James said. "I was surprised at first, too, but she said she got some cooking advice from a friend, so I didn't push it. And she's not pregnant!" he hissed at the knowing look Sirius gave him. "It's the Christmas spirit that's getting into her."

"Sure," Sirius said, waving off. "We'll see in nine months and then we'll decide if Santa thought you were a good boy this year."

James and Lupin couldn't help but snigger, but Harry didn't find it quite funny and scowled. "He better not," he warned, narrowing his eyes at his father. "I forbid you to knock up Mum!"

James and his two best friends burst out laughing even harder than before. "Hey, you're not my father! You can't tell me what to do! I'm a grown person!" James said mockingly, still laughing. Harry couldn't hold on any longer and let out a laugh of his own, joining the other three men.

Then, after they caught their breath back and calmed down, Lily's sweet voice came from the kitchen. "Boys, dinner's ready!"

They all got up lazily, sighing in satisfaction, and walked over to the dining table. James patted on Harry's back and gave him a smile. "Well, it's good to have you home, son."

Harry leaned back in his chair and rested his hands over his now full stomach. He felt as if he had eaten what seemed like three meals at once. He felt very full at the moment, even though it didn't show on him. This was the best dinner his mum ever made. He was so full that he knew he couldn't move for a while. "That was incredible," he breathed, a wide, dreamy smile on his face. If this was supposed to

be just an ordinary dinner, he thought, what Christmas Eve's dinner will be like?

Lily smiled sweetly at him. "Why, thank you, Harry. I'm glad you liked it."

Sirius wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sighed. "Merlin, Lily, who thought you to cook like that?"

She chuckled. "It was just Molly Weasley. I came to her a few days ago to ask her for suggestions for what to cook to Christmas Eve, and she thought me a few of her secrets."

At the sound of the name 'Weasley', Harry's head perked up. "Weasley?" he asked her, as if he didn't hear her right.

"Yes. You met her, Harry, don't you remember? If I recall, one of her sons is at your age. Ron, I think his name is, yes, I remember. Weren't you two friends?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Er – Well, not exactly. That guy is a complete git, you see..." he said.

"Hey, don't talk like that!" James rebuked. "The Weasleys are friends of ours, so do respect them."

"I didn't know you were still in touch with them," Harry said.

"Of course we are," Lily said. "You know what? How about we pay them a visit this week? Harry, you should come with us, maybe you'll get a chance to know Ron a little better," she suggested, looking hopeful.

"Erm – No, I don't think I would," he mumbled quickly, trying to think of a good getaway excuse. "I... have homework to do. Yeah, a lot, a lot of homework. Snape overflowed us with assignments," he said confidently, satisfied with his answer, and the fact that Lupin couldn't tell he was lying. He didn't really fancy going over Ginny's house and sit around while his mother praised Ron as a wonderful guy and ask

him why they weren't friends. He did, however, fancy seeing Ginny again.

"Well, you can skip it for a day, couldn't you? I'm sure you can manage it," she pressed.

"Well, I..."

"Of course he'll come," James finished for him. And with that, the conversation was over. Harry knew he couldn't object his father's final word. He will now have to go with them to the Weasleys.

Just his luck...

Harry woke up the next day, feeling like he had slept for two nights straight. He guessed his mum let him oversleep since it was a holiday and there was no school that day. It was good anyway, because he needed to catch up on sleep.

Turning onto his side and glancing at the alarm clock on his bedside cabinet, his slightly heavy from sleep eyes shot open when he saw that he hadn't overslept at all. The time was only seven in the morning! He grabbed the clock quickly and checked closely if it didn't go off. To his great disappointment, he heard its soft ticking sound and let out a loud groan of frustration as he slammed back on the bed again.

Despite his desperate tries to get back to sleep, he couldn't. He was now fully awake and he hated himself for it.

With nothing better to do, he threw the covers off himself and got out of bed, went into the bathroom to wash his face, brush his teeth and change his clothes. He went down to the kitchen, expecting to see everyone already sitting around the table having breakfast, but instead he found it completely empty. He guessed he was a bit too late to join them, because all the plates and dishes were sitting dirty and empty in the sink. No one was around, but Harry knew they must be near by so he wasn't worried. He helped himself for a cup of coffee and thought to read the morning's paper, but a sudden roar of an engine caught his ears, coming from the backyard.

Harry, curious to what made the rusted sound, quickly dressed warmly and stepped outside into the cold, snowing backyard. There, he found Sirius standing by his old bike – His bike now, Harry corrected his mind – and his father sitting on it, heating up the exhaust, a black helmet on his lap, instead of on his head.

"Hem-hem," Harry cleared his throat loudly enough for the two men to hear him. They turned around and looked at him, his arms folded over his chest, waiting for their explanation, as if he was a teacher who caught two students doing something out of bounds – and not just two students, two Marauders, at that. "I do believe that's my bike you're riding on, Father," he said in a cold voice.

James gave him a scowl and Sirius immediately approached Harry. "Harry! I'm glad you're up! We were just warming it up for you! It's time to have your first go, don't you think?"

"Funny, I would've thought you would care to wake me up first, Sirius," Harry said, still not very impressed. "Where is Mum?" He craned his neck over Sirius shoulder to see his father.

James turned off the motorbike's engine and silence finally fell over the peaceful neighborhood. "She went with Remus to Diagon Alley to do some last minute shopping since it's not so crowded at this hour of the day."

"Oh," Harry said shortly and then a light laugh escaped his throat. "Oh, now I get it. Mum's not around, so you're in a hurry to have a go on the bike, because you know she forbids you to ride it. Nice one."

"Yeah, well, that's another way to look at it," Sirius said with half a shrug as he turned to look at James for a quick moment.

Harry slowly walked forward. "Okay, I'll tell you what, Dad. You give me the first go before Mum gets back home, and I, in return, won't tell her you rode it."

"And what makes you think I will allow you to ride it?" James asked, also folding his hands over his chest, thinking he has advantage over his son.

"Well, that is my bike, now that Sirius gave it to me," Harry pointed out easily, a mischievous smirk playing on the corner of his mouth. "And since it's mine, I might not allow you to ride it. So hand over the helmet, Pop, or Mum will be very cross with you."

James knew that his son had a point Lily would kill him if she finds out he put even one finger on the thing. On the other hand, she would be cross with Harry instead of him, because he was the one who actually got to ride it...

Harry saw his father pout and reluctantly got off the bike with slacked shoulders and the helmet held under his arm. As Harry made his way to him slowly, he could hear him mutter something incoherent, which he swore he heard the words "Git" and "Slytherin" included. Harry, however, couldn't help but snigger and feel victorious when he heard him.

"Don't take it too bad, James," Sirius said, trying to cheer up his friend, but failing miserably as James shot him a sharp look and Sirius back a step in respond.

"Okay," James turned to Harry. "But at least let me show you first what you need to do," he suggested, as he turned the engine back on, the black helmet still under his arm.

But before Harry could hop on the bike, he, Sirius and his father were all started by his mother's hard voice.

"If you two won't step back from that thing right now, you're going to spend Christmas Eve outside in the cold, and for all I care, Sirius can try and make room for you in his doghouse!"

They turned around to see that Lily and Remus were back earlier than they had expected, and now she was standing at the backdoor, her face as red as her hair. Remus was just behind her, holding two brown paper bags.

At her exclamation, Sirius immediately blushed and said, "Sorry, I'm afraid I invited Princess to chew some leftovers tonight. You're on your own."

Harry turned to look at his godfather in disgust. Princess was none other than the neighbors' French Poodle. "What?" Sirius asked innocently. "She said she's clean!"

"Sirius, shut up, you're not helping!" James hissed.

"Turn off that damn thing before you wake the entire neighborhood!" Lily yelled at her husband, and he immediately obeyed and then turned back to her, his head bowed down.

At her furious gaze at him, Harry mirrored his father's position and looked down, swinging his foot at the soft snow on the ground. If it was a question what was louder, his mother's screams or Sirius' old bike, then his mother would have won easily. He doubted the neighbors were bothered by the motorbike running, but was sure at least one person woke up to the sound of a very livid Lily Potter.

"Get inside the house," she ordered in fury, and when neither of them moved, too stunned by the sudden change of tones, she suddenly screamed, "NOW!" and in less than a second they were all back inside.

Lily started pacing around the kitchen table, eyeing her husband and son wrathfully, but other than that, she did not say a word. Remus and Sirius watched at the three Potters but remained quiet. James finally felt like breaking the deadly silence.

"Hmm... Lily, dear," he tried to say softly, but the nervousness was evidence in his voice. "We didn't hear you guys Floo in." He added a smile, which he quickly removed at the sight of her red face.

Bad choice of words, Dad, Harry thought, shaking his head.

"Explain yourself, James," she said sharply, ignoring what he said.

"Er..."

"Explain to me," she cut in, not giving him a chance to respond, "why our son was about to ride that thing when we both agreed that he's too young for it; that he's probably not responsible enough for that yet. We agreed to let him use it when he turns eighteen. Did we not, James?"

"Eighteen?" Harry and Sirius yelled in the same time, both gaping at her.

"This is ridiculous!" Harry protested. "Completely outrageous!"

"Lily, you can't keep him away from a birthday present," Sirius reasoned. "It's silly."

"Then Sirius, you should have given it to him in two years. He's too young for it," Lily retorted. "We already talked about it!"

"When?" Harry asked, his hands on his hips.

"Don't get into this, Harry," Sirius whispered to him, and Harry moved his hands back down, not to spite his mother more.

James ran a hand through his hair. "Lily, please. It's not that of a big deal. We were just trying to have a bit of fun."

"Don't you dare making excuses, James Potter!" she said crossly. "Did you even think what would have happen if a Muggle would have seen you flying on an enchanted motorbike above the neighborhood? Some Auror you make!"

Sirius leaned down to Harry's ear and whispered again, "Maybe they would think they were still sleeping and it was all a dream," referring to the Muggle Lily mentioned.

"Or that they were a bit stoned," Harry added and suddenly he and Sirius burst out laughing hard.

James, however, didn't find it so amusing, especially when Lily's accusations fell all upon him. And here he thought she will get mad at

Harry, not him. "Come on, Lil. We meant to take it for a spin around the valley. No one would have seen us there!" he defended.

Harry couldn't hear it anymore. He hated when his parents fought (even though it happened ever so seldom), and right now he hated them fighting on Christmas Eve's morning and ruining the whole Christmas spirit they were trying to create last night.

So instead of doing it the Gryffindor-way, which was probably the best thing he would have done if he were noble enough and take the blame on himself so it will end quickly, he elbowed Sirius in the stomach and eyed him suggestively. Why would he get punished for something Sirius was to take the blame for, anyway?

Sirius gave him a fake smile of thanks when Harry smiled brightly at him, before he interrupted the heated row between the Potter couple, ending it up with the two of them holding each other in apology. At that, Harry slipped quietly back up to his room, before he heard his mother storming on Sirius for his recklessness.

Much later that day, Sirius' head popped in behind his bedroom door.

"Is it safe to come out now?" Harry asked behind the latest copy of one of his Quidditch magazines.

"I think so. James and Remus managed to calm her down eventually," Sirius said as he walked in and flipped through some other magazine that Harry had left on the floor along with the rest of his mess. "I'm sorry, Harry, about before. It really could've been fun if she would've allowed you to ride it. Maybe we can make her leave the house a bit longer next time. You know, we'll make something up. James will go with her so it'd be just you and me."

"Yeah, then she'll murder me in my sleep. Hell, she'll just scream and knock the wind right out of me..." Harry replied hollowly, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah. Your mum can be quite loud sometimes. I do remember that back at Hogwarts she never stopped yelling at James when he hit on her."

Harry's head perked up. "Mum didn't like Dad hitting on her?"

Sirius laughed and sat on the chair next to Harry's desk and looked at him. "Are you kidding? She hated him! Well, at least she pretended to hate him for the first four years when he chased after her. Then she gave up, and agreed to go out with him on one date, so he'll be happy and shut up then leave her alone. Problem was that she fell for him on that date and since then she couldn't take her hands off him."

"You don't say!" Harry marveled. He never heard that story before and wondered why. He should've known by now how his parents got together. He knew they met at Hogwarts, but never the full story. It really inspired him.

"All jokes aside now, I think you really are going to be someone's older brother soon," Sirius said suddenly in a soft voice, going back to the magazine still in his hands.

For a minute, he wasn't sure Harry had heard him because he didn't say anything, but when he looked up, he was surprised to see him frozen up. His hands were fidgeting and his face paling.

"Wh... what did you say...?" Harry asked shakily.

"Well," Sirius said slowly, closing his magazine shut. "Whether you like it or not, your parents love each other –"

"Oh, cut that out, will you!" Harry threw his own magazine at Sirius, accidentally hitting his face with it as he got up from his bed and stormed back downstairs, his fists clenched, and his shoulders set up. "MUM!"

James and Remus, who were decorating the Christmas tree in the living room, turned their heads at the sudden shout and saw Harry running through the house calling for Lily, while evidently searching for her. They moved away from the tree so they would see what the fuss was all about just as Sirius ran down the stairs and Lily came out of the laundry room, holding some clothes she was sorting out.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked calmly, her soft tone only made Harry feel angrier.

He was taking deep breaths now, his anger radiating off of him and his face reddening. "Are you... Are you –?"

"Am I what, dear?" she asked, confused.

Harry clenched his teeth. "Preg –"

"Harry, don't!" James, Remus and Sirius yelled at the same time. James and Remus were holding their hands out as if trying to make time stop and Sirius stopped halfway down the stairs, his right foot still in midair and his face grimacing as Harry finished the word.

"– nant?"

All three other men froze as though time really did stop, their blank faces matching. Lily seemed to be more confused than before. Her mouth opened slightly in question, her brows furrowed and her head tilted to the side in a small angle.

"Pregnant?" she repeated. "Where... did you... get that idea from, Harry?"

Harry's eyes quickly darted to his father, then to Sirius and back to his mother. "No... no one..." he said, managing an embarrassed smile. He took another deep breath and mastered up all his courage. "So... so you're not... pregnant?" he asked tentatively.

She let out a small laugh. "Of course not!" she said lightly.

And like one person, James, Sirius, Remus and Harry all let out a long, relieved sigh.

James walked up to her, holding her delicate hands in his. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly, obviously afraid she will start shouting at him again.

"Yes. I certainly think I would've known if I was. Did you all think I was pregnant?"

"Well, yes... kind of..." James said slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, there were all those mood swings and all those sudden changes that made us wonder..."

Lily wrapped her hands around his neck. "I just wanted to make this Christmas perfect, that's all. What with Remus here with us and the fear of the Death Eaters threat to get us, I just wanted to make you all feel like home and forget about troubles right now. But, oh James! Next time just ask me, okay?"

"Erm... O... Okay?" James said while rubbing his hands up and down her back to calm her down.

"No!" Harry said sharply. Lily and James broke apart and turned to look at him. "No next time! No more kids. You two keep your dirty hands off each other! Got that?"

Everyone smirked at that, but Harry didn't find it a matter of laughing about. He was totally serious here.

James let out a fake, disappointed sigh and looked at his wife's pretty green eyes. "I guess it's also Harry's decision, isn't it?"

She gave him a playful shove and turned him back to decorate the tree along with Remus and Sirius. "Oh, Harry, would you come here for a second?" she asked her son as she went back to the laundry room.

Harry followed her, wondering what she wanted now. His mind settled on one thing only. "Hey, I'm not going to change my mind about it or anything. I'm pretty satisfied being an only child, and I'd like you to keep it that way, thanks," he said, folding his arms over his chest, showing he already made up his mind.

Lily smiled at him. She put down the clothes she was still holding from before. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something else."

"Oh," Harry said stupidly. "Erm – Okay. What is it about?"

She seemed nervous all of the sudden. "Well, I don't know how to say it... I was just sorting put your laundry and I found something I think I shouldn't have fell across."

She shoved her hand to her pocket and pulled out a yellowish scrap of parchment. "I found this, and I thought it was something I can throw out, so I opened to see if it was important and... Well, I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have done that. It's personal and it's yours, so take it." She handed it to him and he suddenly realized what it was.

How could he forget about it?

He took it from her and looked at it to make sure it was really the same piece of paper he thought it was. He unfolded it and there it was, his own handwriting formatting six simple words, written in black ink. Now that his mother has seen it all he could think of was why he had written this so everyone could find it and read it, and for a minute he thought it was best to just tear it up but he couldn't. It was evident that what was written there was true. And suddenly, he realized he couldn't be angry at his mother, he couldn't feel sorry for himself that another person had read this note and found out what he truly feels. He felt relieved and when he looked up at his mother, he gave her a small smile.

"It's no big deal," he said, shrugging.

She seemed to relax and without making Harry see it coming, she hugged him. "Oh, Harry! I'm so happy for you!"

"Mum! Stop it!" he whined, freeing himself from her motherly embrace. "Honestly! What do you think you're doing?"

She whipped a lonely, happy tear from her eyes and smiled warmly at him. "Do you want to talk about it? I thought last night at dinner you wear keeping something from me when we talked about going to the Weasleys. But then... Why would you want to stay away?"

"Because, Mum. It's a bit complicated. And not to offend you, but I don't want to talk about it. And I'll appreciate it if you won't talk about it to anyone."

"No one knows?" she asked, stunned.

"My friends kind of already know, and that doesn't mean I need to go out and shout it so the whole world will find out." He turned around and started to walk in the direction of the living room. "Thanks for giving it back to me, though."

Christmas Eve's dinner has been spectacularly delicious, much to everyone's delight. It was apparent that Lily really worked hard to make it taste and feel perfect. She really had outdone herself.

Later on that evening, all five of them sat together by the living room fire, talking about almost everything, sharing jokes and simply enjoyed hearing the music playing on the wireless.

Sirius challenged Harry into a game of wizard chess and looked like he was loosing greatly. Remus then took the opportunity when everyone were together and cleared his throat to get their attention.

"I have something to say, if I may," he began. They all looked up to him expectedly and he inhaled deeply before he went on. "There is something that I kept quiet until now, and I haven't told you this before because I didn't want to add weight on your shoulders. Now that we are done with celebrating, I think it is best I'll just share it with you."

"What is it, Moony?" James asked, becoming curious.

"Well, for starters, there's this," he said, pulling out of his pocket the yellow map Harry had given him at Halloween and laid it on the table so everyone could see it. At the sight of it, James, Lily and Sirius gasped in disbelief.

"Is it –" James started and Remus nodded in confirmation.

"I had it for couple of months now. Harry actually was the one who found it and gave it to me," he explained. "But that's not the real piece of news I wanted to share. I want you all to calm down first."

When they just glared at him, he cleared his throat again and then went on. "Okay then. Well, this might be a bit of a shock to hear, so don't say I didn't warn you –"

"Just spill it out, Remus!" Sirius barked impatiently.

"Okay, here we go... A couple of days ago, when Harry and I were sitting in my office, admiring the map, something caught my eye. Among the hundreds of names that appeared on the map, there was a particular one that I wasn't expecting to see. The name was Peter Pettigrew."

Another gasp emitted from everyone's mouth, including Harry's this time. "No!" they said in disbelief, their voices hushed with surprised horror.

Remus nodded and went on. "I thought at first that I wasn't seeing right, that I imagined it because I was looking at the map and telling Harry about how we made it, so I thought 'Yeah, we and Peter as well,' but I realized I wasn't imagining it at all."

Sirius then got up and walked to where Remus sat and snatched the map from the table in a quick move. "He's there? At Hogwarts?"

"How did he even get there?" Lily asked worriedly, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Well... I—" Remus began, but then he stopped when Sirius pointed his wand at the current blank surface of the map and muttered "I solemnly swear I am up to no good". Slowly, the map of Hogwarts appeared, but only a few numbers of dots were shown next to several names of teachers and students who stayed in the castle. There were no less than fifteen people in the whole school. And Peter's name wasn't one of them.

"I don't understand," Sirius muttered and shook his head. "He's not there!"

"That little rat! Escaped again!" James exclaimed, banging his fist hard on the wooden coffee table, accidentally making Harry jump.

Remus stood up and pointed his finger at James, a small smile tracing his mouth. "A rat! Exactly!" They all listened carefully now. "You see, as I was trying to explain, Peter's name appeared together with the names of two students when I looked at the map. When I ran to meet them and asked them if they'd seen someone suspicious who didn't look like he belonged there, they said they haven't, so I let them be. Then I looked at the map again, and Peter's name was still there. The hallway we stood in was practically empty and small so there wasn't any place he could have hide in or escaped me. Then, when I looked back at the students again, I noticed a little bump moves inside of the boy's trousers pocket, and then it hit me: he was hiding in there!" Remus finished explaining his story, and crossed his arms over his chest, looking quite proud of himself.

Sirius looked stunned to hear this. "In his rat form!" he said in a whisper. "That sneak! How do we get him now, Remus? Who were those students you mentioned? Were they Slytherins? Do their parents were considered as Death Eaters? Harry, do you know them?" he said it all so quickly that Harry felt his head was starting to buzz with overload.

What does this means now? First there was the threat the Lucius Malfoy was starting to gather power in order to kill us and be in control again and now there was this fact that Peter Pettigrew was at Hogwarts. He was so close to me. He could've had killed me by now. He could have finished it, but he didn't. What was his plan, anyway? Harry's fingers started to rub at his temples as a headache started to form.

Remus held Sirius by the shoulders and pushed him down gently onto a comfortable chair. Sirius then sank his head in his hands and sighed in attempt to relax.

"Sirius, calm down, please," Lily begged.

Remus looked at her. "Lily, it's all right. I know you are all worried, but we know where he is right now. We are going to catch him and he will pay for what he's done." He sat back down and looked at Sirius. "As to what Sirius asked, I believe those students aren't harmless. They're Gryffindors, for that matter."

"Yeah, so was Peter and look where he ended up," James said darkly, his hazel eyes turning almost black as anger seethed inside of him.

"True," Remus shrugged. "But we're talking about Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, two of the school's Prefects. You know the Weasleys, they're in the Order, so there's nothing to worry about. And as for Hermione, she is actually one of the best students in Harry's year, a Muggle-born, in fact. I think they just don't know that the rat is actually Peter."

Harry started to have a coughing fit after he took in all what Remus just said. Why does all his trouble always have to be connected to the same people? Why does Ron Weasley have to be involved in his life so much?

"You okay there, Harry?" James asked, his attention now on his son's reaction. "You do know them, right?"

Harry relaxed, breathed deeply and then rolled his eyes. "Of course I am. And somehow I knew he kept a rat, a rather old rat in fact, but never realized there was something suspicious going on there. I should have, though. My friends and I used to bet on how long it will take that thing to drop dead. We always lost because it seemed to be the in the same perfect shape every time we seen it. We used to think he changed rats when they died, so we didn't put a lot of thought into why this rat is living for so long," he explained.

James sighed heavily. "So here we go, that Ron Weasley kid is keeping him," he concluded and then turned to his wife, who was sitting still in her place on the sofa. She looked up at him, already knowing what he was thinking. "Lily, I think –"

She nodded. "I'll Floo Call Molly first thing in the morning and let her know we are coming to visit."

Usually, on Christmas Mornings, Harry would jump right out of bed as dawn breaks, sprint into the living room and start to tear at every wrapping of his presents, without even considering waiting for his parents to wake up and join him.

But this Christmas Morning started different. This year, Harry not only was too mature for that, but he also felt like spending every free minute he has at sleeping as much and as peacefully as he could.

James and Lily found it odd that the time was close to 10:30 and their son was still sleeping in his bed. Wasn't he keen to open his presents? They asked themselves. He used to love it so much when he was younger.

"Do you reckon everything is all right with him?" James asked his wife before sipping from his coffee mug, his brows frowned slightly. "He's not ill or anything, is he? After all, it could only be from your cookin – Oww, I was just kidding, you know!" He exclaimed when she pushed his shoulder hard.

"He's fine!" she said firmly, her teeth clenched together in annoyance. Lily could only guess why Harry chose to sleep this late this morning of all mornings. It was obvious to her he wanted to stay away from the Weasleys and stay at home instead. He acted weird when she told him last night he would have to come with them or else it would be seem rude if he chose to stay at home just so he could sleep. When she told him, he then started to stutter and quickly headed to bed. "He's probably just tired from school work," she said. "I'll go wake him up. We need to be at the Weasleys in about an hour."

When she walked into Harry's room, he was sleeping silently in the darkness. She walked over to the window, opened the blinds so white, wintry sun rays broke into the dusky room.

Harry let out a low, complaining groan when the soft light hit his eyes and he squeezed them hard. "Turnitoff..." he grumbled, still half-sleeping.

Lily smiled despite herself. "And Merry Christmas to you too, dear," she said sarcastically. "I'm afraid you have to wake up, Harry," she said, hovering over his face, and seeing him looking at her blurrily through one sleepy eye.

"Why?" he asked grumpily, pulling the quilt over his face and turning around so his back was now to her. Lily shook Harry again, not giving up just yet.

"We need to go, remember?" she reminded him. "And Sirius is getting cranky because we said we will open the presents together, so we are waiting just for you."

"Do it without me then."

"Oh, no, no," she said, grabbing his quilt despite his protests and throwing it to the floor. "You're getting your lazy arse out of this bed right now and you're coming with us to the Weasleys and in five minutes time I want you dressed, cleaned up and joining us near the tree for presents opening, got that?"

He only grunted in respond, which she took as a sign of agreement and she left the room, and went back down to join everyone else.

At exactly five minutes later, Harry was downstairs, though still tired, and Sirius started prizing Lily for her success of bringing him down.

They started opening the presents together and the room soon filled with the sound of ripped paper and with 'ooohes' and 'ahhs' of excitement. Harry loved the presents he received. His parents had given him two tickets for the upcoming Weird Sisters concert in the end of June. Sirius managed to get him a black leather jacket, which in his words "Will suit you well when you ride the bike... Erm... that's of course when you turn eighteen" he added when he caught Lily's watchful eye. Remus gave him a book about Quidditch, which he was glad for, because he knew that if he would have given him any other book, it would probably end up gathering dust on one of the shelves in the library. Draco sent him a nice watch, which obviously he could afford, and Blaise sent him a leather-covered journal, to Harry's great surprise. When he opened the first page, he found a small note

Blaise left inside. It said: 'It's a new year to make new memories, which will be nice to look back at them some day. Just don't write too much about how much you adore her, like she had in hers, because THAT we are all going to remember.' Harry couldn't help but snigger at the comment.

It was now almost noon, and Remus hurried everyone to get to the Floo. Sirius, who was told to stay at home, openly protested and turned into Padfoot and started to growl and bark. "No, Sirius. You are to stay here and that's final. Don't worry, we are going to get him and make sure he will get what he deserves," James said to him and Padfoot turn to look at him with cute, puppy eyes. "I know you want to come and fulfill the promise you made me, but we obviously won't bring him today. We just want to think of a plan first. Then will see what we are going to do."

Sirius turned back to his human form and pouted angrily. "Fine," he muttered and sat sprawled on the couch, with nothing better to do but watch them Floo to the Burrow one after the other.

The hearth in the Burrow's living room turned green and the flames roared high and startled Percy Weasley who sat on the rug near the coffee table as he went over a report he was suppose to submit to the Minister after the Christmas break.

"Mother! They're here!" he called out when he first person to come out of the fireplace was Remus Lupin. Percy got up from his spot on the floor and went to shake hands with the guests and wish them a Happy Christmas. When the last person to Floo in was Harry, as Percy could see, he cast him a dirty look before he excused himself from the room and gathered his things and went up the stairs, not bothering to shake Harry's hand, as he remembered him well from his days at Hogwarts.

Harry felt the familiar stinging sensation he felt every time someone looked at him like that, just for being a Slytherin. It wasn't like he expected anything else. Here we go again, he told himself.

Molly Weasley came into the living room holding a wide grin on her face after everyone dusted the black sooth from their robes. She shook hand with everyone and was nice enough to ask Harry if he

was doing well. Harry wondered if she adopted her children or was just trying to be nice in front of his parents.

"Oh, Happy Christmas to you all!" she greeted happily. "Come on, sit down," she gestured to the small squashy sofas. "Feel at home. I'll just go and get some tea and biscuits. Be right back."

Before they could say it wasn't necessary, she already disappeared into the kitchen. They sat themselves onto the sofas. Harry was feeling uncomfortable and unwanted and tried to distract himself by looking around the room. He still wondered why his parents insisted he will come. After all, it wasn't like the Weasley children liked him so he would feel welcome, on the contrary.

Harry looked around, thinking this house is completely different from his own. He was reminded of the jokes Draco used to tell about their house, of how small it was and that they all slept in the same room. However, now looking at it personally, he knew Draco only repeated what he was told by his father and noting more. This house had a homey feeling lingering in it. It was small, but still nice and he thought he liked it.

In the corner of the room stood a weird-looking grandfather clock. It had nine golden hands, and on each one was engraved the name of a different Weasley. Five hands stood on the word "Home" and Harry guessed this clock showed where each member of the family was right now. Three other hands were pointing at "Traveling" and one stayed on "Work". As Harry watched the pictures hanging on the walls and the ones that stood on the hearth, he searched for Ginny in them. He found some when she was smaller. Her most recent one was of her and her brothers at the Quidditch World Cup, so it seemed. Her hand on the clock was pointing at "Traveling" and he wondered where she could travel at Christmas with the snow falling outside. Then, when he looked again, the three hands that said "Traveling" before, now stood at the word "Home."

She was home. She's here, Harry thought and his heart began to race. He felt quite hot and didn't know if it was because he sat close to the fire or just from thinking how she will react when she sees him sitting on her couch.

Back in the kitchen, Molly poured the hot water from the kettle she set into cups. The back door opened and a strong, freezing wind blew inside. Charlie, Ron and Ginny came inside, Snow in their hair on over their clothes and their hands holding a few paper bags that contained eggs, fruits and vegetables they picked from Diagon Alley.

"Hey Mum," Ron said, putting down the bags he held onto the kitchen table as Ginny struggled to close the door. "This is the last time we're going to find an open store in Christmas Morning. Got that?" he said while his teeth chattered from the cold.

"Oh please, Ron, stop being such a baby," Charlie chided. "We got what we could. They were out of lettuce and carrots, Mum."

"What you got will be enough, thank you," Molly said. "Ginny, will you please help me to put this tray in the living room?"

"Sure, Mum," she said after taking off her robes and gloves. "Are we having company?"

"Yes and I want you and your brothers to be nice to them," Molly said, handing Ginny the tray with the tea cups. She nodded in respond while wondering why she would say something like that. They were always nice to their guests.

She made her way to the living room with a smile, but when she saw who sat there, the tray dropped from her hands, almost spilling the hot tea all over her and breaking the china if it weren't for Professor Lupin's quick reflexes and attention when he stopped them in mid-air before hitting the ground just by flicking his wand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she muttered, when Lupin hovered the tray to the table and Lily helped him put the tea back into the caps, not missing a single drop. "I wasn't paying attention," she said when she walked over to the table, making sure everything was all right and nothing spilled. She cast a quick glance at Harry, who sat next to his mother and was obviously trying to avoid her eyes by looking down at his lap.

"That's all right, Ginny," Lupin said calmly. "Nothing happened."

Molly then came bustling back into the living room, holding another tray of many kinds of cookies and cakes. "Here, I'm sorry to keep you," she apologized and put the second tray on the table. "Arthur will be here soon. He was called this morning to the office to handle some case. Something about Blinding Cameras or something like that, I don't know."

"That's okay, Molly, we understand. We do work at the Ministry and know how crazy things can go there sometimes," James explained with a light chuckle.

"Erm... Mum, if you don't need me anymore, I'll be in my room," Ginny said in a soft voice.

"All right, Ginny," she said when she sat down in front of her guests and Ginny went towards the stairs.

Harry felt more relieved when she left the room. He looked up, now able to act like normal. When he saw her enter the room, her skin flushed from cold and her red hair covered with white snowflakes, she looked heavenly and he couldn't let her see him looking at her like he wanted to kiss her on the spot. He couldn't let her know she made him blush, so he looked down at his lap, avoiding her eyes, afraid if he would look at hers, he wouldn't be able to control the smile that wanted so much to trace his lips from the moment he saw her.

Lily suddenly had an idea and she smiled to herself. "Hey, Harry," she said suddenly. "Why don't Ginny show you around the house and keep you company? I don't think the matter we came to discuss with Molly and Arthur will interest you much."

Harry stiffed and looked wide-eyed at her. Why is she doing this? Is that the reason she made me come here? She wants me to stop avoiding her, doesn't she? He began to stammer an objection, but Molly thought it was a great idea as well and called Ginny back down.

Ginny appeared in the living room more quickly than expected. Harry knew he heard her footsteps stop on the stairs when she heard his mum suggest her so brilliant idea. She acted like she hadn't heard a

thing, but Harry knew she did and that she didn't like the idea their mothers came up with. Spending alone time with her right now wasn't a part of his plan of making it easier to asking her out. It will ruin everything he and Hermione planned, even if it did sound like a brilliant way to pass the time.

"What is it, Mum?" Ginny asked, her shoulder slumped in disappointment because she knew what she was to be asked.

"Could you and your brothers keep Harry company?" Her mother asked nicely. Ginny couldn't refuse to her when she said it like that.

"Sure," she said through clenched teeth. "Come with me," she said to Harry, when she spun around, not even looking at him.

His mother gave him an encouraging look and he returned her a pointed stare in respond. He could see Lupin smile broadly at him, but he chose not to look directly at him, afraid to find out that he realized she was the girl who he thought about when he wrote the notes as part of his exercise to concentrate on his spells studies for the Dueling Club.

Harry didn't have any choice left and got up and followed Ginny up the stairs. Once they were on the first landing, she turned to face him, her hands on her hips and her look hard. "Look, I didn't ask for this and I'm not going to baby-sit you until your parents decide to leave. I'm going to my room and for all I care, do whatever you like, as long as it won't involve following me or breaking anything, okay?"

Harry silently agreed. It's not like he was the one who asked for it. His mum dropped this on him exactly as her mum did on her. And it wasn't like he meant to follow her into her room or something.

When she turned around, something caught his eye and he smiled despite himself. "Nice necklace," he uttered and she stopped, slowly turning back around to look at him suspiciously. "Did your boyfriend give it to you?"

He did that on purpose. He wanted to hear her saying that she and Dean weren't together anymore. He thought it was smart to add the

boyfriend comment, because that way he wouldn't expose himself as her Secret Santa. "Er, no...not exactly," she stuttered, suddenly nervous. She held the necklace between her fingers, and bit her lower lip. "It was a Christmas present from... someone else."

"Won't Dean get mad that other guys sending you gifts?" he inquired.

"I don't think so," she said. "We broke it off long time ago."

Harry smiled inwardly when he saw his little planned had worked. "Oh?" he asked as though surprised to hear. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

Ginny's face suddenly hardened again. "Yeah, right. You are probably thrilled right now, aren't you? You wanted this to happen from the very beginning. You even said you would tell him about the kiss."

"Maybe I am a bit pleased," he shrugged and took a step closer to her. She didn't get away. "You were too good for him. You and I both know that."

She gulped hard and looked up at his face, unaware he took another step towards her. "Well, he wasn't too pleased when he heard you kissed me..."

"...And that you liked it..." Harry added, licking his lips as he looked down at hers.

What was he doing? How did he get so close to her? And for the most important part, why couldn't he get away before he will ruin everything he and Hermione planned.

And then he remembered. The plan he and Hermione had. First, getting her a gift and writing her a card. Done. Then, sucking up to her and compliment her. Okay, he can do this.

"You look..." he said, gazing at her brown, shiny eyes.

"What?" she whispered, her breath hitched in her throat.

"...Pretty wearing that necklace," he finished in a barely audible voice. She blinked. She wasn't sure she heard him right. Did he just compliment her? Flirted with her, perhaps?

Done, Harry thought. Next step, ask her out and when she agrees, kiss her lightly.

He couldn't wait...

He closed his eyes, watching hers close as well and leaned his head down when...

"What are you doing?" asked a voice from down the stairs.

Harry's eyes shot open and his head snapped up, and he saw that Ginny whirled around to see her twin brothers standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at them with narrowed eyes, waiting for an answer.

"Nothing," she answered simply and turned to her room, before any of them could stop her.

Harry tried to avoid her brothers' eyes. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know where he could go to hide, but they were already moving up the stairs, looking murderous. Harry slowly gulped and backed into the wall until he didn't have anywhere else to go, when they were both cornering him.

"You —" Fred said in a low voice.

"Are a dead man," George finished in the same tone.

Harry was about to say he didn't mean any harm, when a strong voice came from behind. "Leave him alone," he said. Harry looked over their shoulders to see yet another Weasley brother, the eldest one if he could recall. He too, had a red hair, but long and gathered up in a ponytail. He was tall and broad and even when he looked bigger and more menacing than the two in front of Harry, he looked much nicer. Well, he did tell them to back off of him, but for what

purpose? Did he want to beat him up by himself? Harry tried not to think about it.

"Bill, are you serious?" Fred asked his older brother.

"Do you know what he was trying to do with Ginny?" George said.

"Did Ginny ask you to corner him?" Bill supplied.

They were silent for a moment, then both sighed in union and said, "No."

"Good, now leave him alone. He did nothing wrong."

The twins backed off and went together to the second landing, and Harry felt his heart drop back to place. They gave him quite a start. He exhaled in relieve and thanked Bill for his kindness.

"You're Harry, right? I recognize you because you look like you father and I heard him talking about you," Bill said, offering his hand to shake Harry's.

"Yeah," Harry said breathily. "I'm Harry."

"Come with me downstairs, will you?" Bill offered, and Harry looked up at him warily. Bill chuckled wholeheartedly and clapped Harry hard on the back, almost making him stumble forward. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you."

Harry followed Bill back to the kitchen. Ron was there, chewing on a cookie and when he noticed Harry, he choked. "Wha... What are you doing in my house?"

"He came with his parents and Remus, Ron, now calm down," Bill answered for him.

Ron huffed, took another cookie from a jar the sat on the counter and went out of sight.

"Don't mind them, they're exaggerating," Bill said, taking the cookie jar from the counter and placing it in the middle of the table, offering it to Harry.

Harry helped himself for one and took a bite, tasting the buttery texture that filled his mouth with each bite. "That's okay. I'm used to it by now. They're giving me that all the time at school."

"You're a Slytherin, right?"

"Yeah..." Harry replied slowly, afraid this news will damage what he built just now with Bill. "Why are you asking?"

"No reason," Bill shrugged. "I used to have a girlfriend in Slytherin when I was at my seventh year. I had a great time with her, but it didn't last. And mind you, I was a Head Boy. You aren't all that bad, you Slytherins."

"Not, most of it are just all rumors. The last one about me said I was a Death Eater..."

"Really? That's a really nasty one."

"You tell me?" Harry shook his head, going silence. "Say, what would you do if one of your siblings were dating a Slytherin?"

"Well, it really depends who we're talking about here," Bill considered. "It wouldn't bother me if it was Charlie, because, well, he's 24 now. Percy is too proud and stupid to do something like that, but he's also so caught up at work at the Ministry that he doesn't even considering dating anyone right now. Fred and George... Well, if the girl is pretty enough they'll go for it, but other than that I wouldn't worry. Ron, there's no way in the world he would date someone from Slytherin. Besides, he has Hermione. And as for Ginny... Well, I guess I can't make up her mind, but if she does date someone from Slytherin, he has to prove he's not evil or anything. Otherwise, I'll kill him."

He shot Harry a quick smile and Harry felt himself starting to sweat in full swing now.

"But I trust you, Harry. You seem like a pretty decent bloke, but if you hurt her, like Fred and George said, you are a dead man. Ginny is closer to me than any of her brothers, so do consider it that I am the most protective of her around here."

Harry faintly nodded. Bill, the big brother, was giving him his blessing for dating his baby sister. He can't mess it up now.

Bill got up from his chair and for a moment, Harry felt like he was towering over him. "Want a game of wizard chess?"

Harry smiled and nodded and Bill went to get the chess set. Ginny was banging her head on her wall over and over again, thinking how stupid she was. He was so close to her that he almost kissed her again. And she almost let him!

What was wrong with her?

She couldn't be having feeling for Harry Potter. Not again. Before, it was just a stupid crush, it's was understandable then, but now it way beyond just a crush. It was feelings. Real, deep feelings.

And she was suspecting something, too. Something was different in the way he acted around her. He actually flirted with her! He never flirted with her before, and if he had, she never took it as a flirt, but only as something annoying he said. How had she even gotten herself into this? She used to hate him, like wanting to murder him-hate him. And now...she was having feelings? And he was acting strange...

He mentioned the necklace. He noticed the necklace. Made her somehow tell him she broke it off with Dean. How? How did he do that? Why did he do that? Was he her secret admirer? Did he send her the necklace? Did he write the note she found in Lupin's class?

No! she thought, shaking her head forcefully, refusing to admit it.

There couldn't be a possible way he was behind it all. It wasn't like him to pull stuff like that.

She had to know for sure. She had to find out.

She grabbed for the handle and opened the door. She went downstairs in searching for him. She finally found him in the kitchen, and he was... playing bloody wizard chess with...

"BILL!" she screamed, causing them both a start.

"What?" Bill asked innocently.

She whimpered in annoyance, her nerves almost breaking at the sight of her big brother playing chess with... with him!

She turned around and went up the stairs again, and locked herself in her room, banging her door shut behind her, causing the entire house to tremble at the thud.

Bill and Harry looked at each other with same confused expression on their face, shrugged and laughed it off.

Ron wasn't having a pleasant first day of Christmas. He wished Hermione was there, but she chose to spend the holiday with her family instead. Now he was having Harry-bleeding-Potter walking around the house and doing whatever he wants, with Bill accompany him.

Fate was cruel to him, he just knew it.

He was about to go up to his room when something from the living room caught his ears. His parents were there (his father just came back home) and they were discussing something with the Potter couple and Professor Lupin in hushed voices, but what he heard was definitely clear.

"Molly, don't you understand?" Lupin hissed. "You have a Death Eater under your roof at the moment we speak!"

Ron, interested now, hid himself behind the door to the living room and listened closely, his mind went racing to the time he thought Harry was a Death Eater, but he saw it with his own two eyes that he wasn't. They weren't talking to him, then?

"I don't know what to tell you," Molly sighed. "It's been in the family for so long..."

"Fifteen years?" James asked.

"Do you really want me to believe you that my son... my Ronald is –"

Ron's eyes widened. WHAT?

"WHAT?" he yelled, suddenly forgetting he was eavesdropping to something he

shouldn't hear.

"Ron?" Molly called out as she recognized his son's voice. "Is that you?"

Ron, now felt defeated, emerged from behind the door and looked down at the floor in embarrassment, his hands behind his back. "Yes, I'm sorry."

"Ron, where is Scabbers?" Arthur suddenly asked his son.

"Scabbers?" he asked in confusion, his brows furrowing. Why are they bringing his pet rat to the conversation they had on him. They were just saying that he was a Death Eater, weren't they? "He's... up in my room, resting. Why?"

"May we see him for a second?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Why?" Ron asked again.

"We won't hurt him; we just want to see him."

"We're interested in him. We want to see if he's a truly magical rat, since he's nearly 16 years old. That's rather uncommon for a regular rat, you know," James said.

"We're Aurors. You can trust us, Ron," Lily said softly.

Arthur got up. "I'll go with you to bring him, okay?"

Ron nodded and he and his father went up to his room to get Scabbers. A minute later, Arthur came down and reentered the living room, holding the rat firmly in his hands. The moment the rat laid his eyes on the three strangers in the room, it straggled to get free and tried to escape. "Don't let him go!" Lupin yelled.

"What are you doing to him?" Ron asked, getting worried. "Don't hurt him!"

"Ron, that's okay, it's not a regular rat," his mum explained when she went to him and held him by the shoulders, keeping him back while his father, James and Professor Lupin Disapparated.

"Where did they take him? Of course he's not a regular rat! You said he's magical!"

"No, Ron, you don't understand," Lily said, walking over to him. "That rat is actually a human being, an Animagus. He's name is Peter Pettigrew and he's a Death Eater and we had been searching for him for a long, long time. He sold us to Voldemort in try to kill us."

"What are you talking about? You're wrong!"

"We're not wrong, Ron," Molly said calmly. "They took him to the Ministry, to get him to his human form and get him confessed. He will lead them to the remaining Death Eaters. He will give them names."

Ron was trying to take it all in. It was hard to believe. Aurors came to take his rat. His old, poor rat. Why would they do that if he was just a normal rat? He realized they were right and he sighed, his shoulders slump.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I'll get you a new rat," Molly said.

"No," he said quietly and looked at her eyes, and she feared he won't give up on his pet that easily. Then he surprised her by saying, "I want an owl."

Lily and Harry waited at the Burrow until James and Remus came back, telling them that the Aurors were holding Pettigrew and that they will have more news soon.

Harry was glad to hear they captured an escaped Death Eater. And it was the Death Eater that sold them out, that wanted them dead, the one that pretended to be their best friend. Inwardly, he felt a small part of his heart begin to feel more relaxed and safer.

They said goodbyes and Apparated home. They filled Sirius of what happened and he got upset about how he wasn't there to do it himself. He told them he now felt like he disappointed them and James assured him that they were proud of him just for being so brave, but they couldn't risk him being exposed, not even to the Weasleys or let Pettigrew know that Sirius was hiding with them. Eventually he relaxed, especially when they sat down for dinner.

"I still think you should have brought him here and let me finish him off," Sirius grumbled.

"We'll let you question him on his trial," James said.

"It was a long day," Remus sighed.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, leaning back in his chair.

A sudden loud knock on the door caught them off guard. They all looked at each other in puzzlement. They weren't expecting anyone at this hour.

"I'll go get it. Maybe it just a neighbor," Lily said, getting up and walking to the door, while holding her wand firmly. They all looked after her to make sure it was alright, and James meant to get up and watch her close, but they all stood up at once when she yelled "James! Harry! Quick!"

They ran to the door, their wands pulled out, ready to strike, but no one stood at the door. Lily was kneeling on the floor, but she was alright, the person she was holding in her hands wasn't though.

James carefully helped her moved the cloaked figure to lie on its back on the floor, and gently removed his hood. They gasped at the same time when they saw who it was. His face beaten and bloodied and he was obviously unconscious from exhaustion.

"Draco!" Harry yelled when he kneeled next to his best friend to take a better look at him.

A/N: Finally! It's done. The chapter I've been looking forward the most to write. I thought about it a year ago, ever since I came up with this plot and I finally put it into words. So please review it and tell me what you think, because I don't want to think it sat in my head for nothing for a year.

Chapter 15 – The Truth about Draco:

Lily went to open the door, her wand clutched tightly in her hand. She hesitated for a second whether to open the door or not. What if it wasn't a neighbor and there was a Death Eater standing outside? Should she take the risk and see if she was right? She decided to be the brave Auror she was, and also she knew the guys were right behind her, watching closely and backing her up. She lowered the wards securing the door and slowly opened the door to a narrow slit so she could take a careful peek outside.

It was now late in the evening and she could barely see the person standing in front of her due to the almost complete darkness outside. She could hear this person taking short, unsteady breathes. "Please... Please open the door..." begged the stranger in a hoarse, male voice, and a faint "Help me" was whispered desperately.

She realized that if there was a Death Eater standing outside her door, she would probably be dead by now. She felt sorry for the stranger begging her to let him in.

Behind her, back in the kitchen, she could sense the boys starting to get up to take a look. It all happened in a matter of seconds. She saw him crouching forward and he gasped in what seemed to her like pain and she couldn't let him stand there anymore. She quickly opened the door fully and as the light of the corridor hit his face, she got a swift glimpse of his features. She recognized the young man at once, despite the abnormally white face that looked as if all the blood was drained from his body. His bright hair was soaked with dark blood, and he also had a deep, bloody gash all across his face, all the way from his left ear to his chin. He then started to sway dangerously and his light eyes rolled to the back of his head as he finally collapsed, his body fell forward limply and she managed to catch him before he hit the floor. She couldn't support his unconscious body for long. He felt heavy and his weight in her arms made her knees buckle and then they both fell down.

"James! Harry! Quick!" she called, frightened. She didn't know what else she could do, but she needed someone's help first, before she could clear her head.

And in less than five seconds, all four men were there with their wands out, ready to strike. When they saw the scene before them, they were shocked. Lily looked up to them silently, her eyes asking for help. James reached out carefully to the cloaked figure lying in his wife's arms and turned him gently around on his back.

Harry then let out a sharp gasp when he recognized the young man as none other than his best friend. "Draco!" he called in alarm, quickly crouching down to see him better.

Lupin moved past them and locked the door, putting the wards back up, while James helped a shaking Lily get up on her feet.

Harry started shaking Draco's body gently, but he didn't wake. "What's wrong? Draco, wake up! Tell me what happened!"

"Harry..." Lily said, looking down at the boy lying on the floor. She put a calming hand on her son's shoulder. "He fainted. He can't hear you. He'll be all right; we'll take care of him." Harry shook his head, unable to believe what just happened.

"Let's move him to the living room," James suggested and then scooped Draco in his arms and walked into the living room with Harry, Lily and Remus following him silently. He gently put him down sprawled on the couch.

"I'll go get some potions," Lily said and went upstairs.

"Should I..." Remus began, looking nervous. "Should I contact someone? The Order? Dumbledore? The Ministry, perhaps?"

James looked around at him and nodded, "I think it's safe to tell Dumbledore first," he said. Remus nodded back and went to use the fireplace and Flooed to Hogwarts.

Harry sat in the closest chair to the couch and kept his eyes locked on Draco's unconscious figure. He looked bad, Harry observed; he looked like he just got out of a fight. Harry then remembered the last time he saw Draco before he came back home. Draco acted so

mysteriously, like he knew something was going to happen to him, Harry thought. He started to drum his fingers on the armrest nervously without even noticing he was doing so, when a dreadful thought entered his mind. Harry gulped with difficulty as he went over it in his head. Could it be that he met his father and fought with him? But how was that possible? He thought that the Ministry placed Aurors guarding all around Malfoy Manor. How could Lucius Malfoy passed by them without being seen?

Harry kept watching his friend quietly when his mother entered the room. She walked over to the couch and crouched down next to Draco, opening the cork of one of the potion vials she brought. She poured two drops into Draco's mouth and then with her wand she began to heal his injuries. The deep, bloody gash on his cheek began to close slowly, but leaving a faint white, thin linear scar where it had been. The natural color was back on his face in seconds. Lily gingerly cleaned the blood from his face with a wet cloth. Draco then stirred and flinched at the touch and let out a low, pained moan. Suddenly, his eyes popped open. As he sat up in a swift move, Lily moved a step back to give him space, but Harry moved forward to the edge of his seat anxiously. He watched as Draco's eyes took in his surroundings, gazing fearfully at Harry's parents, and then he seemed to relax when he spotted Harry. He heaved out a sigh and raised his hand to his forehead as though he was experiencing vertigo. "Where... am I?" he asked softly.

"You don't remember?" Harry asked, gulping. He needed to sound calm right now. "You showed up at my house a few minutes ago, Draco. You were all cut up."

Draco turned to look at him, after looking embarrassed at Harry's parents. "I did?" he asked confusedly. "I... I don't know what... I can't remember..." his voice trailed off, but then he realized something. "But I'm not hurt."

"Well, no," Lily quickly answered, before Harry even had the chance to speak. She looked at him with a small, sweet smile on her face to make sure he won't be intimidated by her and James' presence. "I healed your cuts and bruises. You collapsed on our doorstep." When he just looked at her even more puzzled than before, unable to

remember any of this, she spoke again. "Draco, you do know who we are, right?"

"You're Harry's parents," he looked at Harry when he said his name and then back at Lily. She nodded, but then he looked over her shoulder and added, "And you're Sirius Black."

Lily, James and Harry turned around to look at Sirius. With all honesty, they forgot he was there. He never been this quiet before, it was so uncharacteristically of him. Harry frowned when he saw Sirius. His face was white as a shell and he looked frightened and angry at the same time. James walked over to him and led him into the kitchen, where no one could hear their conversation.

Harry and Lily turned back to Draco, who was now looking at his hands on his lap. "Draco," Lily went on as if nothing interrupted them. He didn't look up at her. "I know everything is really confusing at the moment, but I need you to try and remember what happened tonight before you came here, okay? Can you remember who hurt you?"

Draco seemed to think about it for a long moment before he shook his head. He kept looking down at his hands and didn't say a word.

Harry started to really worry now. This Draco in front of him was so unlike the Draco he once knew, the Draco he met on the train when he first came to Hogwarts. This person was closed up, quiet, shy and gloomy. The Draco he knew was cunning, mischievous, fun and cheerful. It was like the person in front of him was someone he never had met before.

"Draco," he said, catching his attention, "Was it your father? Did he do this? Did you meet him? We need you to remember anything you can so we could help you!"

With every question Harry threw at him, Draco just shook his head more forcefully than before.

Lily put a hand on Harry's shoulder to make him see he was pressuring his friend too much and that he needed to calm down. She then asked calmly, "And what about your mother, Draco?"

This seemed to break him. "I DON'T KNOW!" he yelled and buried his face in his hands.

At the shout, James came back from the kitchen, now without Sirius, and stood at the entrance to the living room and looked uncomfortably at Lily, who looked back at him with the same expression. Harry moved to sit next to Draco, who still didn't look up at any of them, but he didn't know how he should act around him. He never had to do this before, but it seemed like the right thing to do. He tried to put a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder, but Draco sensed it and jerked away before Harry could touch him. Harry was only trying to be sympathetic toward his best friend, but he wasn't offended by his reticence. On the contrary, he understood completely why he acted that way. Even if he tried to help, it seemed like Draco wasn't asking for it, so Harry let him be and just sat by him to keep him company.

The fire in the hearth roared and the flames turned bright green when Lupin came back with Professor Dumbledore, who had a serious expression on his face, but greeted them as happily as he could. Lily asked from Harry to keep an eye on Draco and make him feel at home when the four adults left to the kitchen to discuss the matter.

The two boys who were left alone in the living room did not exchange a word with one another for a while. Harry tried to offer him some of his mum's cupcakes, and even pointed out that this time they tasted good (this made Draco let out a small chuckle, to Harry's delight), but the guest only accepted a cup of tea.

So when Harry entered the kitchen to bring him the tea, he felt as though he was invisible with the group of adults sat around the table and had a very heated conversation. Harry noticed that Sirius was missing and wondered where he went off to. He walked to the counter when he spotted a steaming teapot and poured it into two cups, not wanting the others to think he was eavesdropping on their conversation. Even though, Harry couldn't help but hearing what they were saying.

"He says he can't remember anything that happened. He doesn't know where his mother is or who attacked him," Lily said, explaining to Dumbledore.

"We don't know how he even got here," James added. "But Sirius is not happy with his presence. He's worried he would help give him to the Death Eaters!"

"He's only a boy, James," Lily argued, looking crossed. "You can't really believe –"

"But his father is Lucius Malfoy, Lil."

"Exactly! What if he had attacked him? Draco probably escaped from him and came here; to the only person he trusts the most."

"How did he come here?" James retorted.

"Maybe he Apparated?" Remus suggested. "Or flew? Or maybe he even walked. It could be possible; he did collapse when he arrived, and looked quite exhausted."

James didn't want to accept that. "How did he even know where we live?" he countered.

"Why don't you ask Harry?" Remus replied, gesturing at Harry, who was trying to dash from the room as quickly and silently as he could with a tray of two steaming tea cups in his hands.

"Harry?"

Harry stopped when his parents called him in unison. He tried to look as innocent as he could and hoped they didn't realize he heard almost everything.

"Yes?" he asked.

"We need to know exactly what you told Draco about our situation," James said to him, looking closely at him with prying eyes.

"Erm –" Harry tried to find the right words to say, but his father didn't give him the chance.

"Harry!" James scoffed and Harry looked guiltily at the floor.

"He's my best friend, of course I'd told him everything, but I trust my friends and if you don't, then that's your problem."

Lily looked down at the table with disappointment she didn't want to show to her son and James looked really livid, his face was turning red. "Did you tell your friends about Sirius?"

"I'm sorry! –"

"You're sorry?" James hissed, not wanting to shout so Draco could hear them. "You realize how scared and angry you got Sirius? What if they told their parents? What if that information reaches a Death Eater's ears? You do realize that Draco's father is one and that he's after all of us with a group of escaped Death Eaters, right?"

Harry didn't say anything. Whatever he could say to excuse himself would only make matters worse. He didn't realize how this could be a mistake until now. Now Sirius must be really upset with him.

"James, that's enough," Lily said quietly. "Harry, you can go back to the living room. We'll talk about it later. You can tell Draco that he's staying with us tonight."

Harry nodded but stopped when James called, "What?" in outrage.

"He doesn't have a place to go right now, James. Now is not the time to argue about that. We can't kick him out, it's freezing outside! Where will he sleep?" she said, her tone was hard, same as her look, showing him that he didn't have a choice but to agree with her.

"I agree, James," Dumbledore spoke for the first time since Harry entered the kitchen. "I don't think Draco will be any danger to any of you. However, I think we should help him to remember what happened tonight. It will help us all to understand better and see where we stand."

"How are you going to make him remember?" Remus questioned.

Harry looked interested at his Headmaster.

"He may be blocking it all out of his consciousness, but it's still all there, I'm positive," Dumbledore said. "I can perform Legilimency on him and take the hidden memories to observe them more closely in my Pensieve."

Dumbledore pushed his chair back, stood up and walked out of the kitchen and back into the living room. Everyone followed and saw that Draco was now standing by the window, watching the snow outside. Harry put the tray of tea he still held on the coffee table and watched as Dumbledore explained to Draco what he was going to do. He calmed him down and said that it wouldn't hurt and that he had nothing to be afraid of.

Draco agreed and looked into Dumbledore's eyes. Harry watched silently as Dumbledore searched Draco's mind for the happenings of earlier that night. He gave no indication that he found something as he broke the connection. He simply thanked Draco and walked over to the fireplace.

"I shall look at it in my office and let you know what I witnessed," he said as he threw a bit of Floo Powder into the fire. "Until tomorrow then, have a Happy Christmas!" And with that, he entered the green flames and Flooed back to Hogwarts.

Harry stifled back a yawn. This night was much longer than he expected it to be. He wasn't in the mood for tea anymore, and he was sure Draco felt the same. He was also anxious to get to bed and avoid the talk his parents were about to give him. I really messed up this time, he thought, especially with Sirius. He only hoped his godfather would forgive him for this.

After Dumbledore left, there was an uncomfortable silence in the room and tension filled the air. Lily was the one who dared to speak first. "Draco, we decided to let you stay tonight at our house. You can stay with Harry in his room, if you'd like. We'll set there a bed for you.

There's plenty of room for both of you." Draco nodded gratefully and smiled for the first time that night. Lily then turned to Harry. "Harry, can you show Draco where the bathroom is? I'm sure he wants to get freshened up before going to bed. When you're finished, come down and we'll have a talk."

Harry's face fell at her last words, but he only nodded and gestured to Draco to follow him upstairs. He showed him his room and where the bathroom was and gave him a pair of his old pajamas that looked like they would fit him that he could change into and handed him a towel so he could take a shower. When he was alone and Draco was in the bathroom, he went back downstairs and saw his parents were already waiting for him in the living room. Remus was missing, and Harry guessed he headed to bed.

Their talk did not go well, as Harry expected. He got grounded again, but because Draco was staying with them for awhile, or at least until they saw what Dumbledore has to say, he would have it at the summer holidays instead.

Before Harry went back upstairs, he dared to ask where Sirius went. James explained that he felt it was too dangerous for him to be here when Draco was around so he chose to leave for the time being. Harry hated himself at that moment. He felt as though he made Sirius go away. He knew he must be disappointed in him, but he hoped that he wouldn't be gone for long and the eventually he would forgive him.

He went back to his room with a heavy feeling in his chest that he couldn't shake off. Lily came up after him to help make a bed for Draco and then went to sleep, bidding a small, "Goodnight" before she went. The small gesture made Harry feel slightly better, because it showed him that she wasn't as angry with him as his father and Sirius probably were.

The boys went to sleep that night after a small chat about anything but what happened that night, and soon Harry was soundly asleep, not knowing that the boy next to him was unable to close his eyes. It was the middle of the night when a loud yell broke the silence in the house. The first person to jerk awake was Harry, who felt his heart beat so fast and thought that it might burst out from his chest from the

force. He blindly searched for the light switch of the lamp on his nightstand and turned on the light in his dark bedroom and then put his glasses on his face so he could see clearly, even then his sight was still blurry from sleep. He glanced quickly at the clock on his wall and saw it was barely after three in the morning.

He saw Draco sitting up in bed and breathing hard. His face was very pale and his forehead was covered with beads of cold sweat. He was shaking his head forcefully and he pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

"I'll kill him... I swear I'll kill him..." he whispered as he began to rock back and forth on the bed.

"Draco, what happened?" Harry asked agitatedly, but Draco kept shaking his head and whispered, 'I'll kill him.'

The door to the room burst open and Harry looked up to see his parents and Remus all standing at the doorway with their wands out.

"What happened?" James asked as he saw that the two boys were okay. He then noticed Draco's behavior and looked questioningly at Harry.

"Nothing," he answered. "He just had a bad dream, is all."

Draco, however, groaned with seething rage. "It was NOT a dream!" he said firmly. "It was real. I saw it happened. I saw him kill her!"

Everyone looked alarmed at his words and Lily quickly came over and sat next to him and put a comforting hand on his back, but just like earlier that night, he jerked his body away and Lily pulled her hand back. "Don't touch me!" he growled.

"Draco, what are you talking about?" Lily asked warily instead.

"Tonight... I remembered what happened tonight. He entered the house. Somehow he passed the Aurors and he entered. He sought her out and they got into this row. I was in my room when I heard shouting and I came downstairs when it happened. He wouldn't stop

with the Cruciatus until she stopped screaming and lay still... He used it at his own wife... I just can't get the picture out of my head...my mother...dead on the floor." Draco began to sob and shake as tears leaked down from the corners of his eyes.

It seemed like someone had cast a silencing charm around the room. No one dared to speak. The only thing that could be heard was the blowing wind outside and Draco's sobs.

"He then turned around and saw me," Draco went on, fighting to speak with an aching throat. "I pulled out my wand to defend myself and all I could think of was that I wanted him to pay for what he's done to her. I wanted him dead. So I started to throw curses at him and he fought back easily. Then the Aurors outside must have heard the racket around the house, and they ran inside. He then threw one last curse at me. I tried to escape from it, it barely hit me and luckily, all I got was a cut on my face. It stung so bad that the last thing I remember before fainting was him Disapparating.

"I woke up several minutes later and the Aurors were gone. No one was around. I don't know if they were killed or kidnapped by Death Eaters or they went to get help. I guess they thought I was dead so they left me there.

"The only thing I wanted then was someone to help me. Harry always said that if I needed something I can come to him. And without knowing it, I was at your doorstep a second later. I think I Apparated without realizing it." He paused to exhale deeply. "And that's what happened tonight."

Yet, no one said a word. Draco looked grimly into space and said in a low voice that Harry never heard him use before, "All I know that he's probably after me now if he knows I'm not dead. He will find out I'm still alive and he will come looking for me to finish what he started, but I'm going to be prepared. I'm not going to back down again. I'm going to make him pay for killing her."

He then pushed the sheets from his body and walked over to the chair he had laid his robes earlier. He pulled his cloak on and fastened it before putting on his shoes.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked.

"Thank you for your hosting, but I must leave before he'll know I'm here and come to get me. I can't let him hurt you. You were so kind to me."

Lily stood up and stopped him. This time when she touched his shoulders, he did not protest being held. "No, Draco, don't leave. You're safe here. He's not going to find you here. You can trust us; we're going to protect you from him and he is going to pay for what he's done, but you going after him or going to hid from him is not the answer. Let us do the job, you don't need to worry. Just sleep here tonight and tomorrow we'll talk with Dumbledore and we'll see what we're going to do. You're safe here tonight."

Harry watched as Draco nodded. "Thank you," he said as he took off his cloak and put it back in place. "But I don't think I'd be able to go back to sleep now."

"Don't worry. I've got some Dreamless Potion that will help you," she said, smiling kindly at him.

He sat back on the bed as she left the room to get the potion and he kicked off his shoes. Harry smiled slightly as he realized how significantly his parents changed their mind towards his friend in one night.

Lily came back with the potion and Draco took a mouthful sip of it and lay back in bed. Harry did the same without saying anything to the three adults and went back to sleep. Lily, James and Remus left the room after turning off the light. And the rest of the night passed by quietly for all the inhabitants of the house.

The next day, Harry woke up to find Draco's bed empty. Fearing something happened or that he left at night, Harry jumped out of bed and ran downstairs to alert his parents of his friend's absence. As he burst into the kitchen, he saw that Draco was enjoying talking to his mother in a light conversation while his dad was reading the morning's paper. Remus was mysteriously absent from the room and Sirius... well, Harry hadn't seen him since the night before.

"Harry, is something the matter?" Lily asked with a concerned voice. Draco looked up from his cereal bowl with a slight smile on his face as a greeting, but Harry only sighed in relief now seeing his friend was okay.

"No, why'd you think something wrong?" he replied coolly, joining them at the table.

"Oh, no reason really," James said innocently, folding the paper and having a sip off his coffee. "You just ran here like there's a hippogriff running wild around the house and lost your glasses on the way."

Lily smiled and Draco choked on his cereal at the comment when Harry realized he was indeed without his glasses on. He was in so much hurry to let his parents know that Draco was missing that he forgot to put them on so he could see clearly.

Feeling stupid, Harry pushed back his chair and went back up the stairs to his room to grab his glasses and brush his teeth, which was another small thing he forgot to do earlier.

He was back in the kitchen a minute later, catching a smirk on Draco's face when he realized his mother has changed the topic of her conversation with Draco. "He's always been like that," she said. "He was still wetting the bed until he was —"

"Mum! Shut up!" Harry called before she could finish that sentence. She blushed and got up from her seat, clearing her dishes from the table as Harry sat back down at the table and poured himself some orange juice.

"Aw, come on! I want to know until what age you —"

"No! You don't!" Harry threatened through gritted teeth.

"I'll tell you later," Lily said lightly, as she left the kitchen. "Oh, I have plenty of those. You should see his baby album, too."

"That's it! You're not my mother anymore!" Harry called back at her.

James sniggered as he too left the room after her.

"Oh, shut up. I wonder where she got it from," Harry said to him, but James simply raised an eyebrow at him and then he disappeared behind the kitchen door.

Harry buried his face in his hands and groaned loudly. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm adopted..." he mumbled.

"Tell me about it," Draco said in sympathy.

They had their breakfast while they looked over the paper. There weren't any news about what happened last night at the Malfoy Manor. No report of any deaths (not of Aurors and nor of Narcissa Malfoy's), or sightings of Death Eaters. It was like it never happened. Harry started to wonder if Dumbledore had anything to do with it. Maybe he tried to hush it up and asked the papers not to publish anything about it? But then he remembered his parents probably haven't yet had the chance to contact him regarding what Draco confessed to them from last night.

As if they read his thoughts, James and Lily entered the kitchen again, but now dressed with their cloaks on, ready to leave.

"We're going to meet Remus and Dumbledore at the Ministry," his father explained to the two boys. "We're going to see what happened with Peter and then we'll discuss with the Minister concerning your father, Draco."

Draco nodded.

"We're leaving you alone, but you don't need to worry, the wards around the house are secured and no one can get in," Lily said. "But still, I'm warning you two, no flying motorbikes or even broomsticks until we're home. I want to see the house as neat as we left it, and I want to find you both in one piece. I trust you to hold on to that," she added warningly.

"Okay," they both said at the same time. Draco's voice had a light tone in it, which made Harry wonder if he found this all Parents-Care amusing, since he barely got it from his own folks.

"Remember Harry, you still got that detention," James added, but Harry only waved him off. Why do they need to get so all worked-up like that, anyway? We're going to be fine. They'll be back in a few hours and see that everything went fine, Harry mussed and rolled his eyes.

Lily and James then said their goodbyes and Apparated away, leaving the two boys alone in the big, empty house.

"So, what do you want to do?" Harry turned to Draco.

He shrugged. "Dunno. What are you suggesting?"

"Well, the wizard's chess is always a classic choice. I have some of my Zonko's games in my room, and there's the Muggle Television, but I think you'd just find it weird."

"Why? What's that?" Draco inquired.

Harry pushed his chair back and mentioned to Draco to follow him into the living room. He pointed to the large television sitting in the corner of the room. "Well, basically it's a box that runs on electricity. When turned on, it shows people talking and all, like in real life. It's supposed to entertain, but I never really found anything interesting in it. We only got it because Mum insisted."

"Yeah, that sounds a bit boring. So what kind of Zonko's stuff do you have?" Draco asked and a small smile crept on his lips, before the two of them raced up the stairs to Harry's room.

Two hours had passed and they found themselves completely with nothing to do but lie still on their beds and stare at the ceiling. Harry found himself thinking madly of a good way to pass their time, but no matter what he suggested, Draco didn't like it.

Harry sighed as he rolled off his bed and sat on the floor while finding an over-read Quidditch Magazine stuffed under his carpet. He began

to scan it, but got quickly bored as he already knew every word by heart.

"Our match against Ravenclaw is the Saturday after returning to school," he said dully, trying to pick up a conversation.

"We'll beat 'em," Draco replied, chewing on his fingernails. "That seeker of theirs, that Chang girl, she has no techniques whatsoever. You've got nothing to worry about."

"You're right," Harry agreed. After another long pause he threw the magazine at Draco, hitting him with it on his chest. The other boy propped up on his elbows and raised an unappreciated eyebrow at him. Without seeing what was coming next, Harry got hit by a large, puffy pillow in the face. Draco merely smirked at him and lied back on the bed, and began to read the magazine Harry threw at him just a second ago.

An idea to entertain himself popped then into the devious side in Harry's mind. With a hidden grin, he grabbed the pillow tightly in his hands. Draco did not know what hit him when everything went dark and he found it hard to breathe as Harry thrust the pillow hard on his face, laughing jovially as he saw him wrenching about and trying to get the pillow off his face so he could breathe normally, and probably hex him into oblivion.

But then something inside Draco's mind snapped.

In a swift movement, he was holding his wand threateningly right in Harry's face, who had stopped laughing at once.

The pressure of Harry's hands on the pillow softened and he moved it aside as he saw the grim look on Draco's face.

"Someone can't get a joke," he muttered, pushing himself to get up and he turned his back to his friend. However, he could still feel Draco's wand pointing at him. Harry cast a look over his shoulder to meet Draco's angry, red eyes combined in an empty glare. "Can you put that down? Mum will be over my head if she found out we used magic outside school." But Draco only twisted his lips at him in some

sort of a growl. "Fine, I'm sorry, is that what you wanted to hear? If I'd know you'll take it that bad, I wouldn't have done it."

When Draco got up of the bed and walked slowly to Harry, his wand aimed right between Harry's eyes, Harry couldn't help but roll them. Draco was overreacting over something so small and meaningless. They used to tease each other like this all the time before.

Harry reached out and pushed his friend's wand down. "I'm not kidding anymore, Draco," he said sharply and turned to the door.

Harry didn't even hear the spell being said. A bright white light was shot at him and he felt himself been thrown back all across his room and pressed to the opposite wall. His all torso ached and suddenly he felt weak. He sniffed and felt blood dripping from his nose but he was too frail to wipe it clean. His head hung down, spotting Draco's feet as he came to stand in front of him. His wand was pressed piercingly to his throat and he managed to gulp and mumble something he hoped his mind will help him get it coherent. "Draco... What's happening?"

His vision became blurry and he felt as if his eyelids were getting too heavy to keep them from closing, but yet he forced them to stay wide open as he pulled his head up.

Draco's wand was still at his throat. "Why are you...doing this?" Harry asked feebly, completely confused. His head was spinning, and his knees trembled hard, barely keeping him up. He was almost sure the earth was shaking and for that he thanked he was pressed to the wall so he couldn't fall. He was trying to get everything to focus and just stop turning, but his mind wasn't functioning according to his needs.

"Someone needs to finish the job," Draco hissed.

A sharp, hot pain shot through Harry's forehead. He was hearing himself screaming in agony, and he couldn't escape for the pain to stop his screams. He was sure his head had burst open and that bleeding scars began to cover his skin as he couldn't stand the stinging any longer and he shut his eyes tightly.

Then it all stopped, and his eyes watered like a waterfall.

"Funny how naïve and trustful one can get around their best friend," Draco said proudly. "They share their deepest secrets with him, tell him everything they know and can't tell anyone else. You're a fool, Potter. You knew my father is a Death Eater and yet you still told me everything you needed to hide and let me inside your home." He huffed with a mock amusement. "You bought the story, this show I made up. See, it was suppose to be just you all along. You're the one who stood in his way to greatness, but that Black had to go and ruin it, didn't he? And like I didn't realize he was staying outside in the dog's kennel! The poor fellow. Treating him worse than a dog should be treated. Well, I guess it was his choice, wasn't it? Ran away to hide like a scared chicken when it sees a fox getting close. No worries, he too will be dead after I'll finish here with you."

"Draco," Harry whispered desperately, his mind still reeling, "Please... please don't. It's not like you. I know it's not you. You wouldn't do that to me..." He could feel the charm starting to wear off, but he was still tied to the wall, unable to move away, where Draco was leaning over him.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he snarled. "Of course it's me. It's been me all this time. You see, I was the one who stole your cloak. That day at Hogsmeade, you left me alone at the castle where it was just you and Blaise going down to the village. After you were gone, I took the cloak and left Hogwarts as well. I saw Blaise talking to Pansy and he was completely unaware of his surroundings so I made him dropped the fireworks bag and when he didn't see, I took one. Then I went to meet Father at the Hog's Head. The letter I was reading that morning was actually from him, not my mother, like I told you. When we met, we started to go over and preformed this little plan I just pulled off here.

"He first told me we needed to leave a sign that we were getting stronger. Remember that night, the firework the teachers accused you that it was the Dark Mark that you sent? Remember going into our dormitory and asking me why I was sneaking out? You were a fool not to see that I wasn't sneaking out, but was actually sneaking back inside, after setting that firework off. Your trunk was so messed up from where I searched for the cloak. You were so close to find out

what I did that night. You first thought that I took the cloak, but then you dropped it when you saw it was still there and believed when I said I searched for a quill and ink to write a letter to my mother, which was a brilliant excuse, I think. You never suspected a thing. You bought every word.

"Anyway, that day at the Hog's Head, Father told me everything I needed to do to gain your trust at me to get me into your house without any problems. Then, when the moment's right, I'll kill you and the task he set to himself fifteen years ago will finally be over. See, he promised that when I'll manage it all, I'll finally have the Mark and follow his lead.

"Oh, and thanks by the way for giving me the idea to use the Confundus Charm in order to kill you. I expect you won't feel much since you're under the charm, so they couldn't blame me I tortured you much before you died," Draco said in a voice so unlike his own. He raised his wand higher.

"Draco, please!" Harry begged.

How could this be possible? How could his best friend in the world betray him like that? How could he even pretend to be his friend when all he was planning to do from the very start was to kill him? Harry felt so foolish. Draco was the reason Harry had become a Slytherin. On the short train ride in their first year Harry had come to know this boy, this boy that he was so sure he knew so well by now. And now, after hearing Draco's confession, he knew that he wasn't a true Slytherin at all. It was all because of a mind wrap. Draco had made him see this different side of him, the side the sorting hat had seen that night that made it put him in Slytherin, that made it so sure he was truly belong there. Back then, Harry remembered, he wished to himself to be at the same house as was the friend he made on the train and his wish was granted and he couldn't be any more thankful that night. All the other reasons why he could have gotten into Slytherin were pushed aside at this moment. What was happening now was all Harry could think about.

"One final wish, Harry, my mate?" he said sarcastically.

Harry gulped hard, "No... Please don –"

Draco cut in, "No final wish? Fine then." He smiled crookedly. "Avada –"

Right then a loud crack sound was heard as the door burst down and slammed to the floor. "Stupefy!" someone shouted and Harry felt Draco fall to the floor with a loud thud sound. The effects of his spells were fading as the seconds ticked by and he too slid slowly and limply to the floor with heavy, aching body.

He opened his eyes briefly when he felt a soft hand caress his cheek. He looked up to meet his mother's eyes. He was quite tired and he didn't protest when he was overtaken by darkness as he fainted from exhaustion.

He woke hours later to hear a loud conversation coming from the bottom floor of the house. He found himself tucked safely in his bed. It was now the late hours of the evening and the skies outside had already turned a navy blue shade.

Harry pulled the cover off his body and searched around for his glasses before getting down the stairs. The day's events were still quite fresh in his mind and he wondered what had happened since that morning.

He never expected to find the entire Order in his house, including Dumbledore, Snape and the elder Weasleys. Sirius was there, too, and when he spotted him at the bottom of the stairs looking at all of them with an uncertain look on his face, he marched over at him. Harry prepared himself to be hexed or slapped or anything really. He deserved that, after all. He let down Sirius, his parents and well, the entire of the Order of the Phoenix. When he felt Sirius arms wrapped around him he winched at first, but after his mind registered that he was being hugged he started to melt and his heart bit faster. "I'm so glad you're okay," Sirius said into Harry's hair, and Harry couldn't restrain himself from smiling and hugging him back.

Harry pulled back and looked up at his godfather, catching him wiping away a tear. "Aren't you mad?" he asked quietly.

"No, I'm not mad."

"But you should be. I... I –"

"Harry, I know you didn't mean it. I'm fine. You're fine. We're all fine. That's what matters." He put a loving hand on his head and Harry nodded in agreement.

"Harry, come here please," Lily called from the living room. Harry walked over to his mother, knowing she was about to tell him what happened to Draco. She cupped his face in her hands and he didn't even have the time to feel embarrassed by her motherly actions around everyone else. "I'm so relieved we had gotten here just in time. I don't know what I would be doing right now if we were even a minute late."

"Harry," James added, catching his son's attention. "Draco wasn't a Death Eater, nor was he about to become one."

Harry's eyes went wide. "He was not?"

"No, Harry. He was under the Imperius Curse."

"He what?"

James and Lily nodded. "This morning when we came to Dumbledore to discuss what he had seen in Draco's mind, he said there were big holes there. It was like Draco had lived his life, trying to fight off the Curse, but when it was forced upon him on different occasions, he had become a different person. The times when the Curse took place over his mind had left those holes in his memories. We were wondering if you'd know if he ever acted strangely, like he was shut out or anything of the sort."

Harry nodded. "He did. He once became so calm that it made me feel angry that he could be so peaceful at a time when stressful things had occurred. And there were a few times when he just closed

himself at us and the next day, if now a few hours later, he was like his old self again. I thought it was strange, but I would never imagine he was under the Imperius! I thought he was just having a phase; that he was worried about his mother's health and his father's actions, and he once said he was worried that his father was going to do something to us, so I really couldn't tell if something was actually wrong..."

Harry tried to explain himself the best he could. He knew he wasn't making much sense, but he hoped they still understood what he was saying. "Who... who cast it on him?"

"His father, who else?" James replied. "We suspect it was before the first term began. Lucius must have given him orders of how to act and when to act."

"But that doesn't explain why Draco looked like he was fighting someone when he first arrived here," Harry pointed out.

"We did some investigation around Malfoy Manor. The Aurors that were guarding around are fine. They said they spotted Lucius Malfoy and his Death Eaters group getting in and they started to fight them. The Death Eaters had distracted the Aurors while Malfoy easily entered the house. We suspect he wanted to see his wife to convince her to join him, but she refused so he had no choice but fight her. He tortured her until she lost all strength, but she did not die like Draco thought. When he showed up and saw her not moving he thought he had killed her and went to fight his father. Lucius, of course, needed to dash before the Aurors got extra help, so he quickly fought off Draco and Disapparated along with his Death Eaters. The moment when Draco woke up and found no one was around was the moment the Aurors went to call for help and search for the Death Eaters. He was gone before he appeared again. They only found Narcissa and took her to the hospital. It really did all happen and we didn't hear about it until a few hours ago."

"And where's Draco now?" Harry asked.

"He was taken to the Ministry for an inquiry. They took the Imperius Curse off him and last we heard they said he was cooperative, but he

said he can't remember a thing when he was under the Imperius. He spoke under Veritaserum so they'd know if he was lying to them or not. They promised they will take him to St. Mungo's to make sure there isn't any brain damage and if everything is well, he will be released home and can go visit his mother. He will be back to Hogwarts when the Holidays are over."

"Home to where? He doesn't have a home! He can't go back to that place, not when his father can go back there!" Harry called worriedly.

"Well, actually, Harry," Dumbledore said for the first time that night. "Lucius Malfoy and his escaped Death Eaters had been spotted not too far from here two hours ago. They'd been ambushed until they were captured and sure enough a trial will be held against all them tomorrow morning, despite Christmas. I assure you they will be back to Azkaban where they all belong."

"So everything is alright?" Harry asked, barely believing his ears. "It's all over?"

Everyone smiled and nodded happily. "It's all over."

Harry looked up at his parents and grinned innocently at them. "So..." he said slowly. "About what you said earlier... am I still grounded? Because I think I definitely need a little treat after being almost killed and all that..."

"Well, we'll let you know, but for now, don't push it," James said lowly.

Harry rolled his eyes but still let out a small laugh. It was still Christmas time after all.

A/N: For those who might wonder- no, the story is not over yet. We still have a few more things to solve around here, and a few surprises will pop along the way.

I'm just sorry this chapter had come so late. My Beta had some internet problems and I was really stuck writing the scene with Draco's confession. It was the most important scene I've been waited over a year to write and when I finally come to write it down, I couldn't find the words. And still, it's not perfect but yet it's satisfying. But don't

think that I did nothing while I was stuck with this scene, I started writing one of the most important (if not THE MOST important!) scene of the next chapter or the story in general. I can't wait for you to read it and just hope you'll like it.

The next post will probably take more than a month (note that I warned you), but don't lose your hopes because this story will sometime in the future be finished (hopefully before July 21 when the series of books finally ends). Hope you liked this chapter! Don't forget to review it!

Chapter 16 – Revelations:

It was the day the new term started and it was time to go back to Hogwarts. The weather hadn't changed much; if snow wasn't falling, then strong rainstorms were pouring down. The time was five minutes to eleven and the bright scarlet train standing near platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ was ready to go.

Harry already said goodbye to his parents and Sirius, back at home, was accompanied to the train station with Remus, who now looked slightly ill since the next full moon was due in a few days.

The train blew out steam and began to move out of the platform at exactly eleven o'clock. While Remus chose to go rest in the staff compartment, Harry went to search for an empty one.

It wasn't a difficult task as in the beginning of the first term, considering that there were students that stayed at school during the holidays. Finally, Harry found an empty compartment at the very end of the train and closed the door behind him. He put his trunk and Hedwig's cage on the luggage rack and seated himself next to the window, watching the passing scenery.

The very obvious and unusual part of today was that for the first time since he began at Hogwarts, he rode the train alone. He didn't need to wait for Blaise or Draco to show up. Blaise informed him by owl post earlier that morning that he would meet him at Hogsmeade's train station when the Hogwarts Express arrived. He had spent the holidays at his aunt's in Ireland. He also noted in his letter that he had some big, exciting news to tell him and Harry wondered what that was about. By the sound of his letter, Harry realized Blaise knew nothing about what happened to Draco over Christmas. He was both glad and worried by that. It was good that he didn't know about it. At least one of them had a good and happy holidays break. But it also meant he had to tell him and he really did not fancy doing that.

Draco, however, did not contact Harry at all. Harry had the feeling he was trying to avoid him and any possible conversation over what had happened, not that he needed to worry about it. Harry wasn't stupid. He knew mentioning it would only make matters more difficult for his

friend. Harry had thought about it a lot since the events on the first day of Christmas. He knew how to act and what to say. He just hoped Draco didn't take it too hard. He was probably already at school, coming early so he could avoid people, though Harry doubted anyone knew.

Harry spent a good hour looking out the window until the weather outside became too dark to see anything. Rain started to pound loudly against the pane. He looked up at Hedwig hopefully, thinking maybe she would like to listen to his babbling, since he was starting to feel a bit lonely, but the snowy owl had nested her head underneath her wing and was soundly asleep.

He sighed, trying to think of something better to do. He didn't feel tired, so he couldn't take a short nap, and the lunch trolley hadn't passed yet, so he had nothing to eat.

Just when he thought about going out to take a short stroll down the hall, the compartment door slid open and he looked up and groaned loudly. Pansy Parkinson was looking down at him with a smug look on her pug-like face, her hands on her hips.

"You don't have to sound so keen to see me, Potter," she said sardonically, but still closed the door and sat by his side.

"Please, Pansy, I'm begging," Harry said desperately and moved immediately to the opposite bench, trying to get as far away from her as he could. "Not now. I'm having a very foul day."

"Oh, don't worry, I won't be staying long," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "I just came in to check if you knew where Draco was. He missed the Prefect's meeting and it's our turn to patrol the train, and since I couldn't find him anywhere I thought I would come and ask you."

"All right, wait a second, let me check..." Harry said, making a show of looking in his pockets and under the seats. "Well, he's not here," he finally told her, straitening up.

She pouted, crossing her arms over her chest and looking unimpressed. "Funny. I didn't know you have the sense of humor of a monkey."

"Ha-ha. I didn't know you were lying when you said you wouldn't be staying long," he replied in the same tone.

Her eyes turned into slits as she put out her lips. She got up and grabbed the door handle, but paused before she opened it. "Well, I guess there is no point to thank you. And if we are on the subject, I thought I'd be nice enough to come and show my gratitude to you for letting me know that Blaise liked me. We really bonded over Christmas." She slid the door open, walked out and closed it behind her, but not even a second had passed before she opened it again, just slightly so she could poke her head in. "And by the way, there are two gorillas answering to the names Vincent and Gregory, bullying first-years two cars down from here. Just thought you would have liked to know what your siblings are doing and where to collect them." She added a nasty smile and disappeared.

Harry was so puzzled he didn't hear her last insult at him. All he heard was something about Blaise. Did she really just say that? Did she really like Blaise after all and did that have something to do with the exciting news he mentioned in his letter earlier?

Harry jumped up, opened the door and looked around. "Pansy, wait a minute!" he called to her. She was about to move to another car.

She stopped and looked at him with a frown, her eyebrows showing slight hesitation. Then she gave in and walked slowly towards him. He got back inside his compartment, sat down next to him and waited for her to follow him in. He motioned to her to sit down and when she did, he asked her, looking completely bewildered, "What was that all about? You and Blaise?"

She sighed happily and nodded. "We started sending one to another letters during the holidays. At first it was in a friendly sort of way, then I started to see it became much more and well..." she trailed off and shrugged.

Harry grinned from ear to ear. "I'm so happy for you!" he exclaimed and without realizing it, his arms had wrapped themselves around her in a hug. It lasted about two seconds before they let go. She was smiling too, looking happy for a change, instead of the irritating girl Harry had known her to be.

About thirty minutes later, she left his compartment again to continue her stroll up and down the train. And Harry was amazed. He never talked to Pansy like they just did. She told him everything: how it all started, what they wrote to each other, and how she felt. She was completely fancying Blaise Zabini! His plan had worked; he couldn't believe it! And he couldn't have been happier for the both of them.

Now, if only his other plan would work just as easily...

It was merely two hours ago when she saw him passing by the compartment she and her friends chose. He was walking alone for a change, and he sat right in the next compartment, fully unaware she was only a few meters away. Maybe he did see her, but chose to ignore her? Or maybe that was the reason he sat so close to her; to spite her?

She remembered what had happened on Christmas day. She actually admitted to herself that she was developing feeling for him. Again. Her face flushed with the memory of him being so close to her that she could practically feel his hot breath on her skin.

She was sitting there with her friends, hiding behind a copy of *Witch Weekly* and pretending she was reading while she mulled things over. She was glad she was hidden because she didn't want to explain to Luna or Neville why her face suddenly matched her hair.

Still, she wondered what he wanted from her. She didn't know if she should be grateful or disappointed that they didn't kiss again. He wanted to kiss her, she saw that in his eyes, and for a minute she felt like she wanted to kiss him, too. At the time, she was thankful that Fred and George showed up and interrupted them. She wondered if she would have felt stupid and used if they had kissed again. But that was all before, and she couldn't help but wonder how she would have felt now. She remembered the first time they kissed. Sure, it didn't

turn out very well, thanks to the git, but the kiss itself was good. As much as she tried to tell herself otherwise, she did like it; she just didn't like the person who gave it to her. Well, at the time, of course.

What am I thinking? Am I actually saying this? I like Potter? No, it's just a rush of old, silly feelings from the very distant past, Ginny thought frantically, trying desperately to make herself believe it was true. She just couldn't fall for a Slytherin, and certainly not the same brainless Slytherin twice. She couldn't!

And what was she doing now? She was thinking of having a repeat of that kiss! Why was she tormenting herself like this? She couldn't stand the guy, obviously, so why couldn't she get him out of her head?

He's an insensitive, irritable twat, she thought. He likes playing with other people's feelings. He's a cheater when it comes to Quidditch and he's possibly a cheater when it comes to relationships, too. He's an arrogant jerk who cares about himself and no one else, well, maybe except for his friends and family. He hangs out with Malfoy, Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle. His taste in girls is just awful, seeing as he dated Parkinson. He insults students who aren't in Slytherin, Muggleborns and well, Weasleys.

Ginny sighed and looked out the window in the compartment's door. Pansy Parkinson passed by, and Ginny wondered for a second if she's was looking for Malfoy, since he was absent from the Prefect meeting earlier. Ginny then remembered seeing Potter walking alone and wondered if Malfoy was even on the train at all.

She reached out and shut the blinds on the door, not wanting to see anymore unfriendly faces. She returned looking at an article in the magazine without much interest.

Yet, she sank in thought again. What was it about Potter that she found likeable? Well, for starters, one can't ignore his good looks. His eyes are a pretty shade of green and he has a very charming smile. His hair is too messy, though, I wonder if he ever heard of a comb... He's tall, but not too tall like Dean. I hate over-tall guys, can't reach

them. I guess he has a bit of sense of humor. He's a bit of a good kisser. A good student, a good friend –

She stopped, realizing what she was doing and she could feel her blush creeping down her neck and suddenly, she was feeling way too hot. The cold rain outside wouldn't even be enough to cool her off. She needed fresh air. She needed to wash her face and she needed to close some unsettled matters with a certain Slytherin.

She excused herself and without waiting for her friends to ask where she was going, she stood in the hallway outside. She gulped hard, and turned right only to be facing something she did not expect to see.

Ginny stood frozen at the sight that greeted her. She held a frown on her face and she did not feel as giddy as she had felt a minute ago. She wanted to hit something; a wall, a pillow or a very annoying Harry Potter.

The earlier need to go and wash her flushed face had gone now. Her face had paled in a second as she saw him pull back from the hug he just gave Parkinson. He was practically all over her! Good thing she hadn't witnessed them snogging, because then she would have most likely gone blind on the spot.

She felt slightly sick, watching them together. They had no idea she was looking at them from the other side of the door. Pansy shoved his shoulder playfully, giggling, while he laughed back. Ginny had seen enough. She huffed grumpily and walked back to her own compartment, threw herself back in her seat and stared angrily into space.

How dare he? She knew! Of course she knew! She knew all along that bastard was playing with her. How else could he explain the very intimate embrace he had shared in the arms of that cow Pansy Parkinson? He was talking with her, laughing with her, touching her, and Ginny felt the heat rush to her face, but didn't know why.

Why should she care about it anyway? He was a pig-headed jerk, that's all. Nothing to be jealous of.

The copy of Witch Weekly magazine was back in front of her face, but she did not bother to read a single word from the articles. She ignored everything else and tried to listen to the voices coming through the wall instead.

She was more confused than angry. She was hurt, too. Why would he flirt with her if he was still seeing Pansy Parkinson?

Boys! she thought crossly. Dogs are more loyal than them!

She hadn't noticed she had put the magazine in her lap and started staring angrily into space again.

Ron and Hermione finally decided to show up. Their faces were flushed and their robes crumpled. Even Neville's plants could have guessed what they had been doing.

Hermione and Ron sat in the seats in front of her. They quickly noticed her glare.

"What's wrong with you?" Ron inquired.

"I know what's wrong with her," Luna said in a matter-of-fact tone. She turned to Ginny and said, "It's the rackfets season, isn't it, Ginny?" She winked, but Ginny only looked more furious.

"What?" Ron asked, not following. He looked between Luna and Ginny and held a confused expression on his face. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Ronald. Mind your own business!" his sister retorted.

Ron let out a short laugh. "On, I get it," he said, leaning back in his seat with a smug look. "Only a boy would make her this pissed. Am I right, Ginny?"

He suddenly let out a small 'oouf' sound as Hermione stepped on his foot, Neville shifted uncomfortably in his seat next to her and Luna simply smiled dreamily.

"I said, mind your own business, Ron!" Ginny screamed.

A howl of girlish laughter echoed through the wall behind her. Ginny rolled her eyes and pursed her lips. She stood up at once. "I'm going for a walk," she said and walked out the door again. Hermione quickly followed.

Hermione reached out for her friend and stopped her from stomping off. "Wait up, Ginny."

Ginny turned at her, looking now tired than usual. "What?" she said in a dry tone.

"What's wrong? You looked fine before we left and now you're like this," Hermione said, a worried note in her voice.

"Nothing, Hermione, I'm having one of my bad days. I just want to be alone for a while." She turned around to leave again, but Hermione didn't let go so easily. She ran after her.

"Ginny, come on, tell me."

Ginny sighed. "Well, while you and Ron were snogging in the loos – Oh, don't look at me like that wasn't what you were doing – I found out something... quite disturbing. Well, no... Well, yes... I... I don't know how to put it..."

"What happened?" Hermione pressed.

Ginny looked around to see there wasn't anyone around. She continued walking, Hermione followed and they moved to another carriage. "Well, something happened over Christmas that neither you nor Ron knows..."

She told her all about Harry's visit to the Burrow and how they almost kissed, then finally, how close she saw him earlier with Pansy Parkinson.

"So now you're jealous?" Hermione asked, smiling in spite of herself. Ginny buried her face in her hands, shaking it violently.

"I don't know! I don't know what I am feeling! I'm so confused. One minute he's flirting with me, the next he's with someone else. Do you think he's back together with her? No, don't answer that! I don't want to know. I'm through with Harry Potter!"

Harry looked around the platform of Hogsmeade's train station. It was close to six when the train finally arrived. Luckily, the rain stopped, so they didn't get wet while they descended the train. Everyone was now getting onto the horseless carriages.

"Looking for me?" a voice said behind him. Harry spun around and saw a grinning Blaise standing in front of him.

"Hey! When did you get here?" Harry asked.

"Like an hour ago or so. I waited in the Three Broomsticks, since it was storming. It just stopped raining," Blaise replied. "Didn't want to go out there and get a cold. Besides, the school gates were locked."

"Great. Let's get a carriage," Harry said, leading the way.

"Wait – where is Draco?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. "Oh, he's already there. Don't know how he got there, though. Come on now, I'm starving. Can't wait for dinner to start," he said quickly, changing the subject, though he knew he had to tell him sooner or later about what happened to Draco. He knew he would have to do it, because Draco was probably trying to avoid it as much as he could. He only hoped he could stall it as long as possible.

They found an empty carriage and slowly it made the way up to the castle.

"So, what's the big news you sounded so eager to tell me?" Harry asked.

Blaise didn't stop smiling. It looked like his smile just got brighter by the second. "Harry, you wouldn't believe it. I'm in love!" he said in a

dreamy voice. Harry nodded, having already heard the story from Pansy. "She's absolutely amazing, and beautiful and funny – I didn't know how funny she was! And we exchanged letters all during Christmas. I couldn't believe it at first, but she really likes me!"

Harry kept nodding, feeling happy and glad that at least one of them could find happiness with the girl they liked. "Yes, I know. Pansy told me everything," he said, sounding pleased.

"...and her family is great, She comes from a great Wizarding family, you know? And she's really – Wait, what do you mean 'Pansy told you'? What does Pansy has to do with this?" Blaise's change in tone made Harry confused.

"Who are you talking about?" he asked, puzzled.

"Julia. Who did you think I was talking about?" Blaise replied, now feeling even more confused than his friend.

"Pansy. You know, the girl who sent you all during Christmas break letters, which you replied to just as eagerly, from what I've heard, the girl you were so obsessed with for the past five months until I set you up with her, the same girl who is fancying you back now and thinks you're fancying her, too, but now you're telling me there's someone named Julia in this?"

Blaise looked dumbfounded. "Pansy fancies me?" he asked in a small voice, gulping hard.

"Yes, you prat! And where did this Julia person came from, anyway?"

Blaise looked blankly at him. "She's... she's a friend of a friend of my cousin's, Clarisse. She's in Ravenclaw, fifth year. I sent her letters, too. What did you say about Pansy fancying me?" he said slowly, as if afraid that if he would say it aloud will make it change.

Harry sighed, clearly not predicting this outcome. "She told me earlier on the train. So, what, are you with Julia now?"

Blaise looked completely lost. He ran a hand through his hair. "We said we'll meet up and see how it goes. I honestly don't know what to do now. I had no idea that Pansy liked me that way... I've never been in this situation before..."

The carriage stopped moving when they arrived at the front doors to the castle. They stepped out of it and walked into the entrance hall, dragging their luggage. They had about thirty minutes before dinner started. They decided to go to the common room until then. As they made their way to the dungeons, Harry noted, "You know, Pansy is going to expect you to ask her out on a date."

Blaise looked horrified. "Seriously, Harry, you've got to help me. What would you have done?"

Harry let out a dry laugh. "Lucky for me, I don't have that problem."

Blaise reached for something in the inside pocket of his cloak. He pulled out something and handed him to Harry. "Look at her," he said. Harry looked down at what Blaise shoved into his hand. It was a photo of a girl, holding a white cat. She had long, curly red blonde hair and light green eyes. She was smiling genuinely as she patted her cat. She was pretty, Harry had to admit. "She's gorgeous, isn't she?"

Harry handed him the photo back. "Yes, she is. Too bad you're allergic to cats; she seems very fond of them," he made a sarcastic note.

Blaise chose to ignore it. They followed a group of seventh years into the common room. They said the new password and walked inside.

They entered their dorm and found it empty. Harry looked over to Draco's bed. His belongings were already in place, and he wondered how long he would keep hiding.

"Where do you reckon he is?" Blaise asked, pushing his trunk to rest by the bottom of his bed.

Harry felt slightly uncomfortable with the question. It wasn't fair that he knew what had happened and Blaise didn't, but he just couldn't find the right words to tell him. "Dunno," he finally said, his voice lower than usual.

He put Hedwig's cage on his bedside cabinet, hoping that Blaise wouldn't see through him. He patted the owl's beak with one finger, which she nipped playfully. He suddenly felt a hard shove in his shoulder which caused him to fall to his bed, his face down. He turned around and gulped when he met the end of Blaise's wand. He knew he had nothing to worry about, so he kept his own wand tucked in his pocket. Blaise wasn't a threat to him.

"What do you know that I don't?" Blaise asked, looking down at him while his wand was still aimed at his friend.

"I'll tell you later," Harry said, pushing the wand aside, but Blaise didn't give up as easily as Harry thought. He shoved him back down, looking irritated.

"What is it?" he pressed on.

"All right!" Harry said, giving up. "I'll tell you, just get off me."

Blaise tucked his wand away; stepping back from Harry and helping him sit up on the edge of the bed. Harry thought he heard him mutter a faint 'sorry.'

"Well, it's like this –" Harry began to say, but a strong voice came from the door way and made them turn around.

"You don't need to do this, Harry," Draco said, walking into the room with slow, equal paces. "It isn't your story to tell."

Harry had the funny feeling as though cold had swept into the room once Draco stepped in. He could have sworn it was just his imagination, but the hairs on the back of his neck still stood on end and shiver went through his spine. Without a second doubt, Harry had felt a major difference in his attitude.

"Draco, what's going on?" Blaise asked the newcomer.

"I was talking with the Headmaster in his office a few minutes ago," he said. "He wanted to speak with me about what my father did. I guess Harry was just about to tell you how I was trying to kill him and his family when I was under the Imperius Curse, which none other than my own father had cast on me, so I could do his dirty work and avenge the death of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Harry grimaced, nodding slightly. "Yes, but not with those exact words..."

"Imperius?" Blaise gasped, looking between his two best friends until he settled on Harry's face, as though wanting to confirm what he was hearing. Harry nodded.

"Yes," Draco went on. "The Ministry Aurors had managed to capture my father and an entire group of Death Eaters he helped escape from Azkaban prison that night. My mother was injured. She and Father had quite a fight and he tried to kill her. The Aurors then investigated me after they'd removed the curse and that's it. I thought you shouldn't be the only one who didn't know and it needed to come from me, anyway."

"Wow," Blaise breathed, not believing his ears. "So how long were you under the curse?"

"Pretty long," Draco said. "Ever since the start of first term. You pretty much had seen me switch between my normal self to the possessed part most of the time. It was mostly mood swings, different behavior and stuff like that. The Healers who checked me after the curse was lifted were surprised I was acting normally after that."

"So you okay now?" Harry asked. "Physically and emotionally?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I mean, I want to kill my father, but that's normal I guess," he half joked and Harry laughed in spite of himself.

"Well, forget that. We're glad to have you back. Let's go down to dinner."

Once they entered the Great Hall and headed to the Slytherin table, Blaise caught Harry's arm in a painful grasp, stopping Harry on the spot and causing him to yelp in pain.

"What the hell did I do to you?" Harry demanded angrily, rubbing his sore arm.

"It's her, Harry!" Blaise hissed in panic, pointing secretly ahead at Pansy, who was already seated with her friends in the table. From what they could tell, they arrived a bit too late and most of the seats were already taken, only a few were unoccupied and they were all around her. "I can't sit next to her; I can't deal with this right now! You've got to help me, Harry!"

"Oh no, no," Harry said, still annoyed by the throbbing in his arm. "I don't want anything to do with this. It's your mess, you figure it out. I've done my share in the deal." He walked after Draco, who chose to sit beside Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry, with a small smirk, sat in the only seat left next to him. Blaise looked mortified when he found out that if he wanted to sit with them, he would either have to take the seat next to Pansy, across of them, or go and sit with a group of first-year girls. He cast Harry a dark glare, growling to himself silently and mouthed the words 'I'll get you for this later' before he sat down next to Pansy without much choice left.

She greeted him with an excited "Hi" and he returned her a polite smile as his face flashed a bright color of crimson. Harry smiled proudly to himself as he started to fill his plate with food.

During dinner, Harry had engaged a conversation with Pansy; intentionally speaking about Blaise, so his daft and currently red-eared friend would finally get the point and join in. Blaise only added a few sentences shyly, which most of the time caused Pansy to laugh, to his great surprise. He didn't even try to be funny...

Harry merely chuckled at the jokes, telling Pansy a few funny stories about Blaise. Most of their group laughed at the tales; Pansy shrieked with laughter, Goyle nearly choked on his pie, and Draco tried to hide his snigger behind a napkin, but it seemed that the only person

who did not find these stories amusing was Blaise. Twice he kicked Harry's shin under the table, but Harry hardly cared. It was for his friend's own good, after all. He did it all because he wanted to get Pansy and Blaise together. They needed to stick to the plan.

After feeling he had enough of putting up with Harry's jokes about him, Blaise's shoulders tensed and he stood up and without a word he strode back to the dungeons.

Harry knew he had crossed a line somewhere, and he mentally reminded himself to apologize to his friend later. He would try to explain to him why he did it, but he wasn't so sure that Blaise would accept his excuses. Harry was surprised to see Pansy looking after Blaise with even more interest than before as he left the Hall.

Harry and Draco left the Great Hall a few minutes later with Crabbe and Goyle tailing behind. Pansy quickly caught up with them and stood by Harry's side, joining them as well.

"Do you think he still likes me, Harry? He seemed a bit put out earlier," she said quietly.

"He's fine. He's just going through a phase or something. He should be over it soon, don't worry; it's nothing to do with you," Harry assured her, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder and squeezing it lightly.

A small smile tugged her lips. "Thank you," she said. She waved him goodbye and ran down to the common room to join her friends.

It was funny somehow. Now that he knew Pansy was off his case and that she could actually be totally normal around him, he really started to like her, in a non-other-than-a-friend way, since he still believed something could still happen between her and Blaise, and also, he still couldn't forget about Ginny that quickly... He smiled fondly at the thought of Blaise and Pansy together and if he had to admit it, they could be a cute couple. Only now Blaise had to go and ruin his perfect plan, which would have worked, had he not met that Ravenclaw girl.

"Potter," a voice called coldly and Harry spun around. There was Hermione Granger standing alone, a large book in her hands, and an unfriendly glare on her face. For a moment, Harry meant to greet her kindly, but didn't know if his friends would see it appropriate or if she was faking her crossed expression, so he simply mimicked her glare and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Granger," he acknowledged her indifferently.

He could hear Draco making a disgusted groan behind his back and he chose to ignore it, while Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Potter, the Headmaster had requested I'll walk you to his office since he wishes to talk to you," she said at once, sounding cold.

Draco quickly pushed his way to stand in front of her and stood by Harry. "I'll take it from here, Granger." Harry barely had registered what she told him. What would the Headmaster want from him? Was it something to do with Draco?

"You are due to do rounds in five minutes, Malfoy. If you hadn't missed today's Prefects meeting, you would have known that." Harry was sure he saw a glint of triumph in her eyes, but her expression did not change. Draco made another assaulted sound and walked away, Crabbe and Goyle still behind him.

"Please follow me," Hermione said and walked up a staircase, not waiting up for him, and he ran up to meet her. They walked up to the second floor, until she opened a door to an empty classroom, pushed him inside and locked it behind them with a flick of her wand.

"What's going on? I thought Dumbled –"

"Are you honestly stupid or are you just pretending to be?" she asked, cutting him off, throwing her heavy book on a desk. A loud thump echoed through the dark room.

"What?" he retorted, confused. Well, at least now he knew the Headmaster didn't really ask to see him, so he could stop worrying what he wanted. However, now he was cornered, face to face with a

fuming girl, in a vacant, dark classroom, and he had no idea why she was so angry at him. "What did I do?"

"Oh, don't give me that!" she said, pacing angrily about the room, muttering to herself. She stopped and looked him directly in his eyes. "I'm risking my relationship with Ron and friendship with Ginny so I can help you get together with her, but then you throw that in my face!"

"Granger, what are you on about?" he asked, puzzled.

She started pacing around the room again. "At first, I thought she was just overreacting, that maybe she misunderstood what she saw, but when I saw it myself, I just wanted to strangle you!"

"Again, what?"

"You and Pansy Parkinson!"

Harry blinked, not following. "What about me and Pansy?"

Hermione gasped, looking shocked. "Oh, don't even try to deny it! I saw you two together earlier at dinner!"

At first he didn't follow, but then the words entered his head and he gaped at her in horror. "Pansy and I are definitely, one hundred percent not together!"

She sulked. "Don't lie! Ginny said she saw you hugging her."

"Ginny said that? Where did she get it from? Are you both insane? I can barely stand her," he said, now feeling angry himself.

Then he remembered. He did hug Pansy. "Oh... the train..." he said slowly. Hermione nodded. "She's not interested in me! She told me she was fancying Blaise and I was just happy so I hugged her. I didn't even realize." Hermione didn't look convinced. "I swear! Really, why would I mess up things with Ginny after everything I've done to try and get her? Does it even make sense to you?"

Hermione huffed angrily. "I swear, Potter, if you mess this up, I won't let you see the next day's sunrise!" she said threateningly, so unlike of her.

He raised his hands up in defense. "Make sure Ginny knows there's nothing between Pansy and me, would you?"

Hermione did not say anything. She grabbed her book and stomped out of the classroom without another word.

Harry walked out of there, feeling a bit perplexed. He couldn't help but think what would happen when he and Ginny could finally start a relationship, but with no trust? Would she always think he would turn his back on her and go to someone else and play with her like that?

He felt like it wasn't the time to think about it. He knew that no matter what, he would never do that, and if a matter like that ever surfaced between them, he would have to assure her that there's nothing to worry about.

Harry chuckled to himself and ran a hand through his thick hair. He couldn't believe he was thinking what he would do if his relationship with Ginny be at risk, when there was no relationship at all between them. Although he couldn't help but wonder if it would ever work out between them, they were two opposites after all, his mind still traveled to those places where he yearned to reach already.

He wandered the torch lit hallway and entered the loos at the very end of it. He needed a bit of freshening up before he could come back to the common room.

He flashed cold water on his face and rubbed his weary eyes, slightly smiling to himself when he couldn't stop thinking what their first date would be like. Would they constantly argue or would they be unable take a minute break to catch their breaths since they couldn't stop snogging?

Harry looked up at the mirror, examining his flushed face. He shook it forcefully, in attempt to clear his mind from these thoughts. He reached for the paper towels dispenser, to wipe his hands and face

dry, but found it empty. He entered an vacant stall to grab some toilet paper instead, just when he heard the door creak open and two sets of heavy foot steps entered the room.

"She's nice, isn't she?" He heard someone say. He didn't recognize the voice. The sound of running water in the sink was heard. "Quite a looker, too."

His friend chuckled. "I'll say. Did you see her front? Not bad for a girl her age, eh? Though I think she might be too short for you."

The first one sighed, obviously a fake sigh as Harry could tell. Harry simply rolled his eyes as he wiped his hands dry in toilet paper. "Yeah, but she's been single for quite some time now, so I thought I should just ask her out now before someone else will. Corner said she knows how to kiss and... Well... stuff."

Harry shook his head absently, not paying much interest in their private conversation, after all, boys will be boys, and he couldn't blame guys his age for checking out girls. There was the screech of the metal tap turn shut and Harry stepped outside his stall, eyeing the two Ravenclaw boys, who looked likely to be fifth years, for a minute before heading to the door.

"Just wait until breakfast tomorrow, and I'll set a date with Ginny Weasley."

Harry's feet had halted on their own record at that. He looked back to the other two boys, fixing their appearance in the mirrors and sniggering to themselves, until the tall, sandy haired one, who talked about asking Ginny – Harry's Ginny! – out on a date, had caught his eyes in the mirror and frowned. "Whatchoo looking at?" he called at Harry, his friend turned around and shot him a dark glare.

Harry did not say anything, knowing if he had, he'd be seeking trouble. So thinking better, he turned back and walked out, taking a shortcut to the dungeons.

Harry mentally kicked himself. He knew he should have acted sooner. Now someone else was going to ask her out. Someone who was

more handsome than he was, who was taller than he was, who was more popular than he was, who wasn't a Slytherin like he was, and Ginny would accept his offer and agree to go out with him. He'd never have a chance to date her now. Not in this decade, at least.

He reached the entrance to the common room, said the password, walked inside and straight to his dormitory.

No one was there but him and for a second he wondered where Blaise had gone to or if he even got back here at all. He sat at the edge of his bed, kicking his shoes off, whilst thinking if Blaise was avoiding him.

He let his body fall limply back onto the bed, thinking what he should do now with Ginny. He didn't want anyone else asking her out, of course, but he couldn't just walk up to her and fight another bloke for her. She wasn't his to fight for, he had no right to do such thing; besides, he knew she was still confused about her feelings for him and he knew he should give her time to figure them out; however, time was the only thing he didn't have. Tomorrow morning, that pretty-boy would ask her to go out with him and he would lose any chance of ever being with her. He could not lose her again to another guy.

Hermione said Ginny was upset when she saw him hugging Pansy. That must mean she's starting to like him, otherwise, why would she be upset by that? And hadn't she almost kissed him back over Christmas? Even though he knew that if he walked up to her right now, she'd probably avoid him or scream at him, or both. 'Ginny doesn't know what she wants,' Hermione had said. 'She's still in denial.'

Harry sighed. How much longer is she going to be in denial? He still wasn't sure what he should do.

The door opened and Harry looked up to see Blaise walking into the room, wearing his pajamas and drying his hair with a towel, obviously having just coming back from a shower. He didn't say a thing when he noticed Harry sprawled on his bed.

"So you aren't speaking to me," Harry stated. Blaise sat on his own bed, purposely not looking at him. "Fine, be that way. I was just trying to help, you know. You asked me to do this..."

Blaise suddenly let out a huff. "I did not ask you to make me look like a fool in front of everyone!" he retorted angrily. Harry sat up so he could look at him properly. "I did not ask you to joke about me, Harry! I asked you to help me so I wouldn't need to deal with her at the moment because I was confused!" Harry opened his mouth to retort, but nothing came out. Blaise went on, "For the first time in my life, girls are actually interested in me. I mean, I don't know why, but they do, and the worst part is that I can't choose who I want to be with. It may have happened to you before, when you used to date three girls at the same time, but I'm not you, I'm not used to getting attention from the opposite sex. Tonight I needed some space, but instead of helping me, you kept shoving this suffocating cloud into my face, and I couldn't deal with it. Tonight, all I asked from you is to be my friend, not a bloody matchmaker."

Harry gulped. It only just occurred to him how big of a prat he was tonight toward his best friend. If only he realized earlier this is how Blaise felt, he wouldn't have acted like a complete git. "Blaise, I'm sorry, mate. I had no idea you felt that way, but you've got to see it from my point of view; I felt like you threw everything I've done for you in my face. I thought if I'd stick to my plan, you'll eventually thank me for it, but I saw it was failing and I felt like you threw it all away like I've done nothing."

Blaise sat there with his shoulders slump, looking as sorry as Harry was.

"And you know what Pansy told me?" Harry went on, "she was afraid you didn't like her anymore. See, even after I made you look like a fool, she still like likes you as you are. The question now is if you still like her?"

Blaise covered his face with the towel, blocking the frustrated growl that escaped his throat. He threw himself backwards onto the bed; his body hit the mattress with a weak thump and he stretched out. "I don't know," he muttered through the soft fabric. He removed it just enough

so he could take a peek at Harry. "But it's like you said earlier, Harry, you've done your share of the deal, so it's over now for you. I need to get out of this mess by myself. Don't think I'm not thankful, Harry, because I am. I don't know if I said it before, but I really am thankful for everything you did. You're a good friend."

"Touching as this is, my fair ladies," Draco's voice rang through the room. They looked up to see him leaning against the doorframe, clearly having heard half their conversation. Harry's smile, which brightened at Blaise's speech, disappeared at once. There was something in Draco's taunting voice that Harry didn't like. He was used to been teased by him, but something felt different and Harry frowned at him.

"I don't find it so amusing when I have to do rounds with Parkinson and hear her saying how completely cute you are, Zabini," Draco said sarcastically. "Then come back here and hear the two of you blabbing about it as well!"

Blaise grabbed a pillow from behind his head and threw it in Draco's direction, not even caring if he hit him with it or not. Draco easily dodged the pillow and walked inside, kicking the dormitory's door shut behind him. He passed by Blaise's bed, lifted the towel off his face just a bit so he could see his hidden eyes. "Missed," he said with a bored note to his voice and carelessly let go of the towel, letting it cover his friend's face once again. He walked to his trunk, pulling out his fancy bottle-green satin pajamas and started to change his clothes. "You two are starting to act more like girls every passing day," he commented. "It's a real wonder you can still pee while standing."

"You could use a real good snog once in a while, too, Draco," Harry said dryly, now pulling his own pajamas out of his trunk.

"And who said I haven't?" Draco replied casually, surprising his friends.

Harry turned to look at him just as he had pulled his pajamas shirt on, catching a glimpse of his pale skinned back. Harry blinked once. He was sure he saw a raw mark scorched on his side. He shook this

thought off, thinking he was either imagining it or for the more logical option, it could have probably be an outcome of the duel he had with his father. Harry chose not to say a word about it and instead glanced at Blaise's direction to see if he had spotted it too, but Blaise's head was still covered with his towel, though right now it was perked up at where Draco was standing. Slowly, he removed the towel off his face, revealing a look of complete shock. "What?" he asked with a slight emphasis.

"Just because I don't talk about girls like the two of you, doesn't mean I don't acknowledge them," Draco explained.

"Yeah right," Blaise snorted. "Who will snog you? Millicent Bulstrode is already taken."

Harry laughed at that. "Yes, I think Crabbe is dating her," he added, causing Blaise to roll around and stifle his laughter in another puffy pillow.

Draco did not look offended by that, however. He still wore a small smirk on his lips. "Laugh all you want, but just because I don't have a steady girlfriend, it doesn't mean I don't snog girls. Unlike you two, I actually get to snog girls I like, while you sit and mope all day about yours. You can't even get them on a date and you're mocking me? Tut, tut."

"Whoa, that's low," Blaise said, shaking his head slowly.

"Yeah, we're not speaking of this, it's a sensitive topic," Harry added and his ears changed a hue of pink. "Besides, I never even saw you around girls, so quit acting all macho."

"I'm not," Draco insisted, shrugging. "I just don't go and brag about it in front of the whole house. Well, obviously I haven't been with anyone lately since this all fiasco with my father happened, but that actually changed tonight..."

"Oh yeah? With whom?" Harry challenged, pulling his own pajamas shirt over his head.

"Jennifer Newport," Draco replied without even blinking.

Harry's heart skipped a bit. "No way..." he said slowly, barely managing to find the collar of his shirt to stick his head through.

Blaise sat up at once. "Harry's ex?"

It was true. A year ago, Harry dated her for a little over a month. Jennifer was a Slytherin seventh year, a pretty brunette with blue eyes, who mostly dated boys because she liked the attention it brought on her. That's who she was, another girl who liked being in the spotlight. She and Harry weren't very serious, but he still liked her despite all that. They broke up on friendly terms, though he hadn't spoken to her since.

"How? When did this happen?" Harry asked. Not that he cared, he was merely interested.

Draco shrugged. "A few minutes ago in the common room, after I got back from my rounds. We sat down and well... it just sort of happened, you know..."

Blaise looked impressed while Harry contemplated this. It surely seemed like Draco was back to his old self, and Harry wasn't sure if he likes it or not. He should be happy for his friend. After everything he'd been through, the least he could do was to accept him for whom he really was. He felt a small pang of longing for the old Draco, and he didn't know why he felt that way. The old Draco wasn't his friend. The one who stood in the room with him now was his real best friend.

"So, why is it such a sensitive topic for you, Harry?" a dull voice erupted his reflections.

Harry woke up from his daze with a quick shake of his head and looked shyly at his friends. "I'm not sure I can talk to you about this..." he said uncertainly.

"If you're not going to talk to us about it, who will you turn to?" Blaise reasoned. Harry's first choice in that case of course would have been Hermione, but giving that it was nearly curfew and that he probably

wasn't her favorite person at the moment, he thought he'd better tell them now than to no one at all. Tomorrow may be a bit too late. "Come on, Harry, we're your best mates," Blaise pressed.

"Yes. And even though I know I'm going to regret it later, you should tell us what's up with your redhead," Draco said.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Well... Things are a bit complicated than I thought they would be. She doesn't know what she wants or what she feels and I can't even go up to her and talk, not to mention asking her out... And speaking of asking her out, I found out tonight that there's this Ravenclaw bloke who's going to ask her out tomorrow at breakfast, and of course he's looking so charming, she won't be able to reject him. I'm not sure what I'm going to do..."

"Well, that's easy..." Draco said slowly. "Just make sure he won't ask her until you get to ask her first."

Harry snorted. "And how am I going to do that?"

"We'll help you out."

Harry looked skeptically at them, as though they had grown a second head, but Draco looked serious and Blaise nodded his head genuinely. "Right... But let's leave the option of hexing him as Plan B, okay?"

And so it was, that for the next hour, they sat down and plotted what Harry should do...

Morning came much too soon, and yet Harry perked up early, changed his clothes and headed off to the Owlery. His body was shaking slightly and he regretted he didn't wear a sweater or a pair of gloves this early in the morning. The air was icy and his warm, unsteady breath was coming out of his mouth in small puffs of vapor. The sun had just started to shine, its warm glow casting soft beams of gold over the deep oval skies. All Harry could hear beside the echo of his footsteps on the marble floor was the squeaky cheeping of birds and the chirping of crickets.

He ascended the spiral staircase to the Owlery once he reached it and silently entered the circular room, careful not to alert the entire pack of dozing owls, hooting softly in their sleep with their heads buried under their wings. The air in the room was damp; the floor was a mess of scattered straw, owl droppings and animal bones. He looked around and spotted Hedwig nested on a low perch in the right corner of the tower. She had seemed to recognize her master's presence when he entered the room. Her big, amber eyes blinked questioningly at him, as though asking if he had come for her. He walked over to her, scratched her pale feathers affectionately while she nibbled his fingers in return. She seemed to understand he had not come for her and went back to sleep.

Harry scanned the room for the second time for a suitable school owl, one of the few that were already awake and watching him. He found one sitting on a perch above Hedwig, a tiny Scops owl, and then tried to persuade him to come down. The owl finally flew to him and landed on his outstretched arm. Harry then pulled out of his pocket a small roll of parchment he had prepared the night before with his friends' help. This parchment was actually taken out of the journal Blaise had got him for Christmas, and Blaise tipped him that it wasn't exactly an ordinary sheet of parchment, and when that got Harry interested, he refused to say another word about it.

After giving the owl the instructions to whom and where to deliver his letter, the small bird hooted once in comprehension and took off.

By now, Harry could hear the unmistakable sound of students going down to breakfast in the Great Hall, and just thinking of it, Harry's stomach gave a lurch, both of hunger and anxious. This will better work...

Ginny let out one hearty laugh just as Hermione and Ron joined her across the table at breakfast. She had been so engrossed in a conversation Lavender and Parvati were having, that she hadn't even noticed they arrived.

"Hey, what's so funny?" Hermione asked, though Ginny merely waved her off distractedly.

Ron huffed. "Earth to Ginny?" he called, waving a hand in front of her face, which she slapped away.

"What?" she absentmindedly replied.

Hermione seemed keen to know what the conversation was about and started to listen to her roommates as well. Ron rolled his eyes in boredom, filling himself a bowl of cereal and trying in all his might to look interestedly in their talk.

"She's really good. You should all go and see her," Parvati coaxed. "And not just because she's a relative..."

"Wait, see who exactly?" Hermione asked.

"Parvati's aunt is a Seer," Lavender explained excitedly, her eyes beaming. "She just opened a new place down in Hogsmeade."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and looked doubtfully at Parvati. It was a well known fact that she did not believe in Seers or anything that was future-telling related. She always said that it was rubbish and a way to scare people and steal their money. She'd been like that ever since her third year when Professor Trelawney told her that she 'doesn't have the Inner Eye.'

"No, really, Hermione, I know what you're going to say," Parvati said, eagerness clear in her voice. "But she's nothing like that. She always talks about love and friendships. She's nothing like Professor Trelawney; she never predicts death or the like. She's not using crystal balls or tea leaves and such, she just looks at you and she knows."

Ginny giggled. "Sounds like I should go and see her next time there's a Hogsmeade trip. What do you say, Hermione? Want to come?" she winked.

"You don't really believe in that, do you Ginny?" Hermione countered with a weak voice.

"Oh come on, it just for fun. What's wrong with knowing a bit about your future? She might even tell me when I will finally have a normal boyfriend..."

"I can tell you that and it will actually be true," Hermione said, leaning back in her chair. There was a small trace of a smug smile on her face, but it quickly disappeared.

"Yeah, and free," Ron added. "I'll tell you what this is," he said, pointing his dripping spoon at Ginny. "It's a waste of your money, that's what it is. A total rip-off."

Parvati made an insulted sound. "I'll have you know that last time I saw her, she told me that I will lose track of time, and the day after that my alarm clock went off on its own and my watch broke!" she interfered, sounding dramatic. Lavender gasped in disbelief, Ginny giggled again and Hermione rolled her eyes, muttering 'oh, please...' under her breath.

"Hey, speaking of Hogsmeade, did you talk to Mum?" Ginny then turned to her brother. She completely forgot to ask him about it.

"'bout wot?" he asked back, his mouth full of cereal.

"Is she still refusing to let you go to Hogsmeade or do you need to make another Polyjuice Potion, just so you could sneak you way out of the castle again?"

He swallowed and looked up at her. "As a matter of fact, she signed my form just before we came back," he answered proudly, puffing his chest.

"Really?" Hermione looked hopeful. He nodded with a pompous grin on his face. "You can come this time?"

"I can. And it was all because they took Scabbers away from me. She felt bad about it that I don't have a pet anymore. Now, how long was it since the last time we had a normal date, hua?" he asked his girlfriend, flinging a hand around her shoulders and pulling her closely

to him. She looked into his eyes adoringly and gave him a peck on the lips.

"Since the last time I puked..." Ginny muttered. She threw a few grapes at them picking them from a near fruit bowl. "Really, people are eating here!" Ron stuck his tongue at her and Ginny returned the gesture immediately. Hermione laughed at the childish behavior of the two siblings.

"Okay, so where will we go?" Hermione asked Ron, shifting back the conversation to where it was in the beginning before Ginny interrupted them.

"Well, how about we go down to Parvati's aunt and predict our future?" he suggested, and Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. She turned back to her food.

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "I thought it was a waste of money, Ron," she mocked, taking a bite off the food in her plate. "Hypocrite."

"Heck, I haven't spent a Knut from my allowance since the summer holidays," he laughed nervously, noticing the dark look Hermione gave him. "Well, be...besides the money for you Christmas gift, of course," he added quickly. The answer seemed to please her. "Maybe she can tell me if we win the Quidditch Cup this year, it'd be a great opportunity to raise a bet..."

"Of course we'll win the Cup. There's no question about it," Ginny said, ignoring half the things he said.

Hermione, however, narrowed her eyes at him again. She smacked his arm. "Not pulling a Fred and George act here, are you? Think about it first before this goes down to your mother. If she finds out you're doing illegal bets, I doubt she'll let you come back and finish your N.E.W.T.s next year," she rebuked. "Moreover, you can lose your post as Captain and you wouldn't want that, now would you?"

"Oh great, mail's here," Ron said, looking up, obviously not hearing a word Hermione said. She shook her head and Ginny smirked.

Owls flew into the Great Hall from all directions, dropping letters and parcels to their respectable receivers. A barn owl flew at them and landed in front of Hermione, delivering her the morning's paper. Ron reached to untie it from its leg, but in return, he received a nasty bite. "Oww!" he yelped, withdrawing his hand and sucking on his bleeding finger. "Grumpy, are you?" he asked the bird.

Hermione smiled in sympathy and paid a golden coin to the owl, which hooted angrily once and flew away.

Ron then snatched the Quidditch section, grumping on bloody owl bites and Hermione who meant to scan the front page's news looked up when something grey and furry caught her eye.

"Ginny, you have an owl," she said. Her redhead friend, who was reading the back of Ron's paper, suddenly looked up and focused her gaze at Hermione.

"Sorry, what?" she asked.

Hermione pointed at the owl waiting for her at the middle of the table, sticking his leg at her, a roll of parchment attached to it with a string.

Curiosity shot through her, and Ginny untied the letter from the tiny owl, giving him a small piece of her toast as a treat before he flew away. She wondered what it could be and what it was about. She didn't recognize the owl, but he looked like one of those that the school owned.

She wondered who will send her a letter. She carefully rolled the letter open. A scowl appeared on her face and she wrinkled the letter into a ball and tossed it inside Ron's nearly empty cereal bowl.

"What is it?" Hermione, who had been watching her closely, asked with concern. Ron put his paper aside and pulled out the crumpled paper ball and started to shake it from the milk that drenched it.

"A prank," Ginny said simply, reaching across the table for Hermione's newspaper and disappearing behind it.

"What did it say?" Hermione pressed.

Ginny sighed angrily. It sounded like it took her a great deal to control her emotions and not to snap at Hermione. "Nothing. It's blank."

"Whoa!" Ron suddenly called in alarm. "What the –"

Splatters of milk hit the newspaper Ginny held, and apparently milk drops flew everywhere. Ginny tossed the paper down angrily. Luckily for her, she was hidden behind it, so she hadn't been hit with milk in the face. "Could you be a little more careful when you're cleaning that? There's no need to splash milk all over the place, Ronald! You're lucky the newspaper blocked it!" she said crossly, but then she froze when she saw what Ron was holding in his hands. He did not hold a crumpled ball of parchment, but a neat, smooth sheet of it, as though it was brand new.

"It – it smoothed by itself!" Ron stuttered. He cast a look at Ginny, who looked back at him with wide eyes.

"Don't touch that!" Hermione called, startling them both. Ron threw it as though his fingers had been burned. "It could be cursed," she added.

"But we've already touched it," Ginny countered, fear crossing her eyes. "If it was cursed, we should have had boils or nosebleeds or something by now, don't you think?"

Hermione shook her head. "Ginny, the least we could do is getting it checked."

Ginny sighed. "Fine, but I have to go to class now. I have Snape next. Argh, double Potions, my absolute favorite," she said sarcastically and made a sour face at that. "We'll meet after school at the library?"

"All right."

Ginny got up and swung her bag over her shoulder. "Er – So what do we do with it now?" she asked, looking down at the parchment now lying peacefully on the table.

Ron and Hermione stood as well. Hermione flicked her wand with a swirling movement of her wrist and the mysterious parchment glowed pearly white for a moment before it soared to her and she carefully tucked it into her book bag, as though it would explode any moment now. Ginny knew one can never be too careful, especially when it involved curses and jinxes. To her, it looked like just another regular parchment, quite harmless, in fact. She was sure she wouldn't have noticed it otherwise, hadn't it just straightened on its own. Ginny knew Hermione acted wisely, suggesting they would check it out, just in case.

They had left the Great Hall together and parted at the entrance, each going to a separate way.

Hermione, who meant to go up the stairs to her Ancient Runes class, suddenly felt a rough pressure on her left shoulder and turned around. With a cross glare on his face, Harry Potter was standing in front of her, looking down at her menacingly. Hermione for a second had the sudden thought that he was about to strangle her right then. His jaw was set hard and his eyes were dark and narrowed. She opened her mouth to say something, but he started first.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked at once, his voice hard and demanding.

Again, she tried to reply, only this time she couldn't find her voice at all. She glanced around them, to see if anyone was watching them. Surely, Harry knew it would look strange and suspicious if they would be seen talking together again. She was thankful for the heavy crowd of rushing students that started to get out of the Great Hall just then, mingling around them and swallowing them in it. No one cared to look at them, everyone were in a hurry to make it to their class before the bells rang, so they were left unnoticed. Hermione had the faint idea of what this was all about, why he would suddenly corner her like this – he was probably upset about her yelling at him the night before.

"Harry –" she hissed.

"Is this how you're helping me?" he spat at her.

"What?" she asked, taken aback, her eyes widening.

"Give her back the letter this second, Hermione, or I swear –" but he never got to finish that sentence since she began to laugh.

"Oh, so it's yours?" she said, looking at his face with a mixed expression of surprise and amusement. "Oh, I should have known! But then again, why would you charm it?" She tilted her head in a small angle, resembling a curious puppy.

Harry looked at her strangely. "I didn't charm it."

She folded her arms over her chest and looked straight into his eyes. "Then how do you suppose to read it?"

"You read it like any other letter!" Harry replied in frustration, his voice a bit louder than usual.

She squinted at him. "Are you sure?" she asked testily. "You didn't use an invisible ink or something like that?"

"What are you on about, Hermione?" he demanded again.

She clicked her tongue, raising her hands in defeat and shaking her head as she opened her bag and pulled out the spoken letter, this time she wasn't as careful as she was before, now knowing it wasn't jinxed or cursed.

Before she could hand it to him, he snatched it out of her hands as soon as he saw it. As he looked down at it, she could see his eyes widening in surprise, and almost popping out of their sockets as he saw a blank sheet of parchment and not the letter containing his words. "But I... There were words...!" he stammered, looking frantically at both sides of the paper. "I don't understand that." He looked up at her, "Are you sure it's the same one?"

She nodded. "I've never seen anything like that before. Maybe you sent her a blank paper instead?"

He shook his head, still glancing down at the parchment in his hands, and moving a finger across the surface, as if he would feel the ink bulging out. "There's no way I've mixed it up with another paper. Wait... Blaise did say it was quite different. You don't think it erases the words you write on it, do you?"

"Could be, but maybe you should ask him and make sure?"

Harry shook his head again. "No, I don't have time..." he muttered. Then all of the sudden he let out a loud growl. "I'm going to kill him!"

He spun on his heel and hurriedly made his way to the dungeons. Hermione, after checking she had enough time to get to her class before the bells ring, followed after him.

Harry strode in the direction of the Slytherin common room, where he knew Blaise was staying since they had a free period now. He was vaguely aware that Hermione was behind him. All he could think of was finding Blaise so he could explain this. Then he'll hex his sorry arse into a pulp. At the thought of that, Harry seized his wand and flexed his fingers over it in a firmer grip.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione called from behind, her breaths coming in short gasps. "What's that?"

Harry came to a halt and looked back at her. She was pointing at the letter in his hand. Harry gave it a quick glance before shifting his eyes back to her, meaning to ask her what she meant, but he needn't to since he noticed it himself.

Harry brought the parchment closer to his face so he could observe it better. A wide smile spread on his lips. "Oh, he's a genius!" he exclaimed and turned back to look at her. Now that he knew what Blaise had meant, the hasty need of wanting to kill him had fled away as if it never existed. "Hermione, make sure you give it back to Ginny immediately, okay? It's important that she'll read it right away!"

"Why? What's the rush?" she asked, taking back the letter he was handing back to her. She glanced down briefly at it and realized how Harry was able to read it now.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "It just that... I found out last night that there is this Ravenclaw guy that likes her and he's meaning to ask her out today, if he hadn't already, and I just know she's going to agree, unless she reads this letter first."

Hermione smiled kindly. "Don't worry. I'll make sure she'll read it and that she won't even have the chance to talk to him."

"Thank you," he smiled back. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "Okay, now go! Hurry! You've got to find her!"

Fortunately for Hermione, Ginny had told her earlier that she had Potions next, so she took a turn left and hurried straight to Professor Snape's classroom.

She found Ginny waiting outside with her friends and rushed over to her. To her alarm, she was talking to a tall Ravenclaw bloke, who seemed to look smug at the conversation they were having. Ginny, however, looked hesitant and let out a nervous laugh as he spoke to her.

"Ginny!" she called, waving at her. The other girl perked her head up at the sound of her name being called. She excused herself from the guy who she was talking to as she spotted Hermione coming towards her.

"Hermione?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

Hermione, panting hard again, bent down and put her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. She straightened up and shoved Harry's letter into her friend's hands. Once again, it had flattened out on its own from a crumpled state. "It's okay, it's safe," she said breathlessly.

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked with a frown, looking skeptically at the parchment in her hands.

"Yes!" she huffed. She took a deep breath. "Look at it in here. You'll be able to read it."

"Er – Okay?" Ginny replied uncertainly, pushing the letter into her bag, trying to understand what Hermione meant by that. The loud jingle of the bells was heard and a second later, the door to the Potions classroom had opened behind them with a swing and Snape stood at the entrance, rushing them in.

Ginny thanked Hermione and turned to enter the class. "Oh, and Ginny?" Hermione added suddenly and Ginny turned back around. "That guy you talked with earlier – Don't go out with him."

Ginny gaped at her. "How did you know he asked me?"

"Miss Weasley, come inside now or don't come at all," Snape snarled, and Ginny reluctantly turned again and quickly entered the class with a sheepish look on her face. Snape looked down at Hermione. "Don't you have a class to go to, Miss Granger? I think it would be the first time you'll be late. What a surprise. And here I thought I wouldn't be there to witness it." His voice held a definite sneer and without another word, he smiled leeringly and shut the door hard, disappearing inside.

Hermione's heart gave a wild jump as she remembered she was in fact late for her class. She ran all the way to the sixth floor, still out of breath, knowing that what she did was probably a good deed, for maybe this time Harry and Ginny would finally be able to make amends. She felt a great wave of satisfaction rush over her as she sat down in her desk and pulled out her books. And even that she was five minutes late, for the first time in all her Hogwarts years, she didn't care at all, for she knew that right now Harry was probably sitting and thinking of her and when Ginny will read the letter, both will surely be smiling.

As Ginny sat down in her usual seat, she felt slightly confused. How did Hermione know that she had just been asked out of a date? Well, Ginny told herself, making a fleet attempt of convincing, it's Hermione – she knows everything.

She sat with her friends and waited for the lesson to start. Snape walked to the blackboard, his coal black robes blowing at his wake,

and with a flick of his wand, words appeared on the black surface. "Pull out your books and turn them to page 157," he instructed. "And Miss Weasley, your bag is glowing. Put that light out now or I'll take points from you," he said threateningly.

Every eye in the room was now staring at her as she tried to understand what just happened.

She looked down at her bag, lying discarded on the dungeon's filthy floor and saw that indeed a soft glow was coming out of it. She frowned, and checked if her wand was in her robe's pocket like it usually was. When she found it right in its place, she wondered what could be the source of the light. She reached for the bag to take out her book, at the same time she searched within it. She then noticed that the light was coming out of none other than the letter Hermione had just given back to her. She folded it in half and held it tight so it won't snap open and straighten itself again and quickly tucked it in another thick book she carried in her bag. She tried to ignore it the best she could until the class was over and Snape had dismissed them. It seemed to be the longest class she ever had and the anxious to look at the letter had almost broken her nerves. Only when she walked out of the room did she pull out the letter again to take a better look at it.

"What are you reading, Ginny?" Luna asked, walking beside her.

"I'm not sure..." she replied uncertainly.

She was sure she was holding the same parchment she received this morning in the mail since it smoothed right when she pulled it out of the bag she hid it in earlier, but the weirdest thing was that this parchment wasn't blank anymore – words had appeared on the surface, glowing out brightly as though fire had ignited them. Instead of what was supposed to be ink, was light, together forming letters.

As she passed by an open window and the white daylight from outside shone around her, she noticed the words disappear at once as if they never existed and what was left in her hands was only a blank piece of parchment again, that until she stepped into the shadows again that she saw the letters forming on the paper once

more. Now she understood why she wasn't able to read it in the Great Hall, which was lit so brightly that morning that there was no chance she would have spotted something there. She remembered what Hermione told her earlier: 'Look at it in here. You'll be able to read it,' and for the second time that day Ginny asked herself how Hermione knew that.

She halted, lingering in a dark corner so she could read the letter carefully. Luna stayed by her side, her curious prominent eyes gazing at her.

As Ginny looked down at the letter, she could tell it was the same writing style that belonged to her so-called secret admirer. She smiled softly as she scanned the page.

Dear Ginny,

I hope that by the time you receive this letter I hadn't missed my chance yet. I know there are plenty of guys in this school that would do anything to go out with you – and I'm included. I know that by the end of the day that Ravenclaw bloke from your year will give it a try and ask you out, and I'm sad to say that I'm not him. I just hope that you won't accept his proposal before you hear what I have to say. I know that for the rest of the day I'll sit around and mope, too concerned about whether you agreed to go out with him or not. I'm also sad to say that I tried a few times myself, but you never spared me a glance, you never took me seriously enough.

So this is my last attempt of doing this properly. I would like to see you in order to do it. I can't put it in a letter and simply expect your reaction the way I want it to be, because there is the chance that I will be disappointed. I know you are most likely imagining someone who's either too hideous to walk up to you with uncertainty, embarrassment and insecurity or either he's too arrogant and good-looking that he hadn't enough of all the girls in this school that now he's trying to get to you. I'm proud to say that I'm neither of those types and if you're curious to find out for yourself, I'll be waiting for you this afternoon at five in the Owlery. I hope that you'll come and that you won't be too disappointed.

I'm not sure it's a good idea to sign with my name or initials until you see me. So I'll use what you're already familiar with,

Yours sincerely,

S.S.

"Merlin," Ginny muttered to herself. "I hope S.S. still stands for Secret Santa and not Severus Snape..."

The thought of Snape sending her love notes and Christmas gifts gave her the chills and a shiver went up her spine.

She contemplated what she had just read. Would appearance matter to her? He sounded so sincere and nice, someone with great personality. And she wasn't as shallow as some other girls she knew. She cared for people if they were different. Neville wasn't that attractive, but she still went with him to the Yule Ball, and Luna was an outsider, but she still hung out with her.

Ginny sighed, making up her mind. It wouldn't hurt to see who it is and what he's like. Maybe it would be good for her; maybe this one happened to be just the one for her. After all, all the boys she went out with thus far happened to be a disaster walking on earth.

Ginny's heart fluttered at the image of someone waiting for her in the Owlery. She felt full, content and happy. Her secret admirer wanted to meet her; he wanted to ask her out. Finally, she thought to herself contently. She would meet him; she would be able to see who it is. She imagined him looking out the window of the rounded room and into the school grounds outside with his back to the door. And as she'd step inside quietly, he'd sense her presence and turn around. He would look back so intently and flash a smile at her. As he'd tuck a stray strand of raven black hair aside, his sparkling green eyes will twinkle through his glasses as brightly as his smile grow wider –

"Ginny?"

Luna's hand rested on her shoulder and snapped her out of her daydream. She then shook her head violently, forcing the image of

Harry Potter out of her mind. She didn't understand why she would imagine him of all people.

She hoped she was safe in the shadows; she didn't want Luna to see her blush.

"I'm fine," she said hastily, forcing a reassuring smile at her friend. She tucked the letter back into her bag.

"I don't think Professor Snape will send you letters, he just yelled at you in class," Luna said in her typical dreamy voice. Ginny snorted and they resumed their walk, finally reaching the Great Hall for lunch five minutes later.

She and Luna departed, each girl going to her respective House table. As Ginny sat down and helped herself for some food, she couldn't shake the buzzing excitement that the letter gave her. He can't be too creepy, she reasoned, and he said he's not arrogant, so he won't lie when he's talking about his looks, but what if he's someone I can't stand, someone like Colin Creevey?

She decided she wouldn't go alone. She would need someone to be there with her, to support her in case things go really bad. She knew who it would be and already knew what she was going to say, but Ginny won't take 'no' for an answer!

"Erm... Ginny?" someone said hesitantly from behind, tapping her on the shoulder. She glanced around to see Kris Huston, the Ravenclaw guy who asked her out earlier, just like Hermione and her secret admirer knew he would.

"Kris..."

"I was wondering if you thought about what I asked you earlier. You didn't give me your answer and..." his voice trailed off as he nervously fiddled with his fingers.

She remembered that Hermione told her not to go out with him, it sounded much like a warning. Maybe Hermione thought he wasn't the guy who will suit her. She trusted her friend completely and knew

she was always right. Without a second thought, Ginny apologized. "I'm sorry, Kris, but no."

He looked disappointed at the strict answer and she felt bad about it, but she knew there must be a reason for Hermione to warn her not to go out with him.

"That's... that's okay," he said with a strong voice, waving her off. He walked away and Ginny turned back to her food, anxious for Hermione to arrive so she would ask her to accompany her to the Owlery that afternoon.

"No, Ginny, forget it. I have two essays to complete, five chapters to read in Ancient Runes and plus, I had promised Ron that I would help him in History of Magic, so no!" Hermione said stubbornly once Ginny had started to beg.

"Please, Hermione, please!" Ginny pleaded again. "I can't go there alone, I will chicken out; I know I will! You have to give me your support!"

"I can't, Ginny," Hermione insisted. "Ask Luna, I'm sure she will agree to come with you. Besides, it's your thing, Ginny. How will it look if I show up with you to meet a guy who wants to ask you on a date?"

"You won't come inside, you'll wait outside."

"I'm sure I'll feel uncomfortable there, listening and all..."

"Hermione!" Ginny gasped, sounding scandalized. "What do you think, that I'm going to snog his brains out as I walk through the door?"

Hermione blushed at that, bowing her head into her plate of food.

Ginny huffed. "Please, Hermione, come with me! I swear I won't ask you for anything else ever again – well, not ever again, but for the rest of the year!"

Ginny had started then a round of 'please's' and wouldn't stop. Hermione, who had enough of hearing 'please, please, please!' caved in and shouted, "You owe me big!"

"OH!" Ginny suddenly burst out and threw herself over the table at her best friend, knocking off goblets and baskets of rolls while flinging her hands around Hermione's shoulders, now exclaiming a round of 'I do's' and 'Thank you's.'

Hermione's face slowly contorted into a mischievous smile. Seizing the moment, she silently added, "and you lend me that lilac blouse of yours that I like?"

Ginny almost fell for it as she was still yelling "I do", then she frowned and loosened her grip around Hermione's shoulders. Looking at her friend with a sour face she said, "no, but I'll owe you something else."

Hermione's shoulders slumped down and she sighed in defeat. "Bigger?"

"Fine!"

"Okay... So when do you want to meet?"

It was around seven minutes to five o'clock, and Harry shifted his eyes from his watch, forcing himself to focus on something else beside the time or the angry hoots of the owls around him. He started feeling more nervous by the second. She should be here any moment now. Hermione had reassured him earlier that Ginny will come to meet him. He just hoped she wouldn't be late. He couldn't stand waiting for her any longer. He had anticipated meeting her and to tell her what he had been planning to say for so long.

He was pacing around the circular room, practicing what he wanted to say, choosing his words carefully. He was sure it wouldn't matter anyway, because he was sure that the minute she stepped through the door, he wouldn't remember his name, let alone what he wanted to say.

He wondered how she would react and what she'd say. He hoped her reaction would be positive. After all, hadn't Hermione said it bothered Ginny to see him with Pansy? He was sure it meant something. He also held onto the memory of almost kissing her at Christmas. He knew he had her convinced. She wouldn't say 'no' this time...

The sound of someone climbing up the stairs to the tower was echoing through the door and Harry found himself running about the room nervously, trying to find a much better spot to stand in and wait. He grew impatient as the slow rhythm of ascending feet grew louder and louder. Harry swallowed hard, feeling his heart beat ten times faster than normal. One more glance at his watch told him that she was right on time.

He leaned against a distant wall, having a clear view of the door and waited for her to show up, silently cursing himself under his breathe for the worst place he chose for them to meet. But none of that mattered now. She was here. He was going to do it, to get it done with.

"Hi," he started the second she entered the room, but a split second later he was completely choked out and started coughing uncontrollably.

"Harry?" she asked, an evident surprise in her voice.

He finally managed to overcome his coughing fit and looked up at her. "Pansy, hey..." he said to the girl who stood before him. It wasn't who he expected it to be. "What are you doing here?" he asked hurriedly, fearing that if Ginny show up any second now, she won't like to see him together with Pansy again. He needed to get her out of there right now.

"Well," Pansy started, "Blaise is avoiding me, I'm afraid. I thought I should take matters into my own hands and stop waiting for him to come around. I decided to write him a letter and tell him exactly what I think and that I won't have it the way he's treating me anymore! I would have done it personally, but every time I come near him, he flees away," she said, a notable pain in her voice.

"Erm..." Harry wasn't sure what to say, but he made a mental note to talk to Blaise about Pansy later. "Okay... So go on then, make it quickly. You know, the sooner he gets that letter, the sooner he'll realize how stupid he was for avoiding you." Harry kept shooting glances at the door, watching out in case Ginny comes inside, while hoping he wasn't too obvious in front of Pansy.

"You know, Harry, I don't think I've thanked you enough for all that you've done. You went through so much trouble, even if Blaise is acting like prat and he doesn't appreciate what a wonderful friend he has, I, on the other hand, am thankful. I don't know what I would've done without you. Sure, things had worked for the worse, but I realized that I misjudged you all along. You're a very sweet and caring friend," she said, and without seeing it coming, she leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek, her hands resting on his shoulders.

The door suddenly slammed hard, the walls shook at the effect, scared owls flew around them hysterically and they jumped apart with a start. Pansy shrieked as owls flew passed her and out the windows. Harry looked around, the first thought entering his mind is that a gust of wind shut the very heavy door, but then he remembered why he was there in the first place. He ran for the door, not bothering to say goodbye to Pansy, and ran down the stairs until he reached the bottom. He looked haphazardly left and right and at the end of the hallway he spotted Ginny's silky red hair flying widely after her as though a great tongue of fire was soaring through the air as she and Hermione strode away. He sighed tiredly, knowing it would be best now to give her some space, instead of running after her. He would also have to explain things to Hermione, who he was sure, was siding with Ginny as before.

He walked back to the common room with slacked shoulders and a heavy feeling of defeat in his heart.

Hermione was trying to keep up after her angry friend, but Ginny was much faster, especially when she was angry. "Ginny, please, wait for a second," she called after her, but Ginny didn't slow down. They now reached the Fat Lady's portrait. Ginny spat the password at her and ran straight to her dorm room, with Hermione still behind. Ginny shut

the door to her room at Hermione's face. The bushy-haired girl let out a sigh, not sure how to deal with this or what to say. It would be easier if Ginny will just admit that she liked Harry...

She pressed on the door handle and slowly pushed it open. She carefully poked her head inside, fearing the something would come flying in her direction, but when nothing happened, she allowed herself to take a better glance at the room.

Ginny sat slumped in the middle of her bed, her back leaning against the headboard and a sour look on her face. Her knees were bent and a small black leather-covered book sat open in her lap. She had a quill twitching violently between her fingers, scratching on the paper with black ink. "Ginny..." she said tentatively, crossing over to her. Ginny acted as though she wasn't even aware that Hermione was in the room with her. She kept writing in her diary, not paying attention to her bushy haired friend. "Ginny, I'm sorry. I know you feel angry, but maybe he has an explanation..."

Ginny's hand stopped moving and suddenly her head snapped up, her eyes were narrow and dark. "An explanation'? What could possibly be his explanation for... for..." Hermione bowed her head. She swore she would not let Harry live this through. He messed up enough. And he lied so much, she couldn't think she would want to even look at him again. She knew Ginny was upset, she saw what happened, too. And that was after he swore to her that he had nothing going on with Pansy Parkinson! He dared lie to her in the face after everything she did for him! "...for standing me up! That jerk!" Ginny finished.

Hermione blinked once and frowned as her friend's words sank in. Stood her up? What does she mean?

"And to think I had to put up with another snogging display of Potter and his pug!" Ginny added.

"What?" Hermione asked, confused. "You're not...?"

"I'm not what?" Ginny asked, annoyed.

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing..." Hermione realized that Ginny wasn't upset for just seeing Harry and Pansy together, but for being stood up by who she thought was her mystery guy, who she was sure, was not Harry. Ginny didn't even realize that the guy who waited for her was Harry himself and that he didn't stand her up. The only thing Hermione was still confused about is what was Pansy doing there, gluing herself to Harry? And if Harry did in fact waited for Ginny, why would he let Pansy kiss him when he knew Ginny was about to come and meet him?

She needed to confront him before Ginny got tired of these games and gave up, but she was too upset with him to go out and find him and besides, she still had a load of homework to get done and she had promised Ron she would meet him in the library. Guess I'll have to hex him when I see him...

Harry walked around the hallways with no purpose or idea where he was heading. His mind was whirling with anger and depression, and the portraits stared at him in concern, asking if all was well, but he merely waved them off, barely sparing them a glance as he wandered around.

He felt like he hated everyone right now: Pansy, for kissing him; Blaise, for making her act all mushy like that, which caused her to kiss him; Ginny, for running away before he even had the chance to exchange even one word with her; Hermione, who was probably siding up with Ginny like in the night they had come back to school; and he was even mad at himself, for being too foolish in believing this plan can actually work, and letting this all happen and get to this point.

He could feel his blood boil with anger, his veins expanding with each fast beat of his heart.

Muffled voices echoed around a corner, and as Harry turned, he spotted three Ravenclaw blokes he recognized as their Quidditch team's Chasers. He then remembered that on this Saturday, his own team was going to be playing against them. He hoped the weather changed because he knew for sure that his team would play like rubbish and wouldn't have a chance of winning the match in the kind of storm raging outside.

As the Ravenclaws walked past him, they all smiled mischievously at him, resembling a few Slytherins Harry was much too smart not to be associated with, and at once shouted out in union with a note of competitiveness: "You're going down, Potter! Grab your broom tightly!" Harry's head span around at them, ready to counter back, but then he was sure someone had hit him with a body bind curse: there, in front of him stood, not the three chasers who went past him just now, but three identical copies of the same tall, blond boy who wanted to ask Ginny out. "She's mine...mine...mine!" each of them echoed separately, whispering it out, but it sounded as screams to Harry's ears. He watched, perplexed and lost, as a huge, evil grin spread on each of their faces before they burst out in a harsh laugh. Harry knew it was his mind that was playing tricks on him and forced himself to shake his head vigorously. The triple vision of the blond Ravenclaw had dissolved back into the three Chasers as they walked away, laughing to themselves.

Harry stopped walking and leaned against a cold stone wall, trying to get his mind focus back to the present. He took one deep breath to clam his nerves, though it didn't help much, because he was sure he was now hearing Ginny's voice, laughing merrily. He needed a shot of cold water splashed on his face, but before he could shout *Aguamenti* and point his wand at himself, he opened his eyes just a crack and looked around. He found himself having a clear view of the entrance doors to the library, just when Ginny entered, having said goodbye to a friend, who passed by Harry as though he was wearing his father's invisibility cloak and she hadn't notice he was there.

His eyes lit up at the sight of Ginny and everything seemed draped with gold and perfect once again. This was his chance, he knew, the only way to calm himself and make things right. He couldn't stand the thought he almost had Ginny talking to him and then it all went down the drain... Now, the only way to find out what Ginny was feeling was to approach her and talk to her right here, right now. Knowing she was probably still upset with him, he needed to do it carefully.

As he walked into the library, for what it seemed the second time in all the years he spent thus far in Hogwarts, he started to look around the tables and shelves for the ginger haired girl he was looking for.

Finally he spotted her: she was sitting alone in a table mere feet in front of him, leafing through a large book.

He couldn't believe how his luck just turned! Just less than an hour ago, she had stormed out of the Owlery, and he was sure it will take him days until he'd be able to see her again. His mind went completely blank of all thoughts as he started to move closer and closer to her, making his mind of what to tell her and how to apologize to her. The only thing in his mind was to do what he meant to do, before Pansy appeared in the Owlery— He was finally going to ask her out!

With a bright smile on his face, and the enormous feeling of happiness and joy, he took large, determined strides towards her table. All of that had disappeared as he suddenly felt a hard tug on his right wrist and a second later, he found himself being thrown against a hard wall in a dark corner of the library.

Unexpectedly, Hermione's face appeared even before he had the time to reach for his wand or even register what had happened.

"You slimy git! What are you doing here?" she hissed harshly. "Do you want to get out of here as a jar of ashes?"

Harry pushed her away from him, giving himself some room before replying. "I don't care how angry you might be, Hermione, or what you're going to do to me, but I had enough of waiting around for the right moment to come!"

"Well, it's good then that you know that you went overboard, but it's not my job to do anything to you, regardless of how mad I am at you right now!"

Harry ignored her and pushed himself off the wall and moved past her, meaning to cross his way back to Ginny's table. He didn't need Hermione to help him talk to Ginny, he could do it alone. He didn't need her breathing down his neck, telling him what to do or how to act. It was time he did it himself.

Hermione caught his wrist again to hold him back before he even reached an inch out of the shadows. He hadn't the time to resist before she whispered, "I didn't mean it would be me, although I think I ought to do something to you after what you've done. I actually meant Ron would gladly hex you. Look, he's right there! And I'm sure that if he wouldn't do it, then Ginny will surely finish the job for him." Harry looked between the shelves of a large, old bookcase. At the table Ginny was sitting in, he could now see Ron taking the seat across from her.

Besides him, Hermione continued talking. "Don't think she looks calm and giggly now because she's in a good mood. She's faking it so Ron won't notice something's wrong. Deep inside, she's seething."

"Hermione," he sighed, turning back to face her. "I don't care anymore. If I won't ask her now, someone else will and then I would lose my chance again."

"You can't do it this way, Harry. You have to stick to the plan!" she insisted.

"Stick to the plan'? What plan exactly do you mean, Hermione? Your plan doesn't even work! I have to do everything on my own!" he whispered crossly at her.

"And you wouldn't have to if you had just listened to me. I know what I'm doing."

"So am I!"

"Right," she said slowly, crossing her arms over her chest impatiently. "And kissing other girls in front of her is a part of your plan, I assume?" She raised a warning finger at him when he opened his mouth to defend himself again. "No! Don't you even bother denying it again, I was there, remember? This time I saw it myself, so don't even say it didn't happen!"

He now mimicked her position, folding his own hands over his chest. "Oh, did you?" he countered mockingly. "Tell me, Hermione, what kind of kiss did you really see? If you had stuck around a second

longer, you would have seen her giving me nothing but an innocent peck on the cheek! Nothing more! I pushed her away the second I realized what was happening." When Hermione didn't look convinced, he went on. "I'm telling you, Hermione, it wasn't in a romantic sort-of way, since Pansy, like I have told you before, fancies Blaise, not me!"

Hermione remained silent. She appeared to have nothing to say to counter that. The only thing she did was to glare at him through her narrow eyes, clearly thinking of something to say. Harry gulped, dreading her reaction.

At last, she let out a long exhale and raised her chin high in a defiant expression. "I don't know why I feel like I should forgive you again, or why I'm still bothering to help you with this, but something tells me that I should trust you." Her words had caused him to flash the widest of smiles he ever expressed in his life. "But —" she said and his grin immediately faded. "This is the last time I'm forgiving you, Potter. No more Pansy-Kissing-or-Hugging or any other girls for that matter. If you want to be with her, act like it. Ask her out when she's alone and carefree, not when her brother is right there, ready to kill you. Stop caring about your own interests and think about her for a change; how would she feel when she sees you doing this or that? Think about what you do and say before you do it. I care about Ginny as if she was my own sister and if you hurt her, I'll have to hurt you."

Harry nodded vigorously, taking the sight of her serious face. She looked really intimidating when she was angry, like one would not want to cross her. He knew he shouldn't judge her just for being a girl. This girl, after all, has probably read the entire collection of books about hexes that this library holds.

"Okay, I will. Now, can you please go and tell her what I just told you that happened in the Owlery, so she won't be mad at me anymore?"

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "I can't, Harry."

"What? Why?" he said in shock, not expecting this answer. He thought she understood and that she believed him. "You just said you forgive me!"

"I did forgive you, but I can't tell her what you said because she's not mad at that. She..." her sentence ended in an incoherent mumble and she cast her head aside to avoid looking in his eyes.

"What was that?"

"She... she thinks you stood her up," she said with a slight grimace on her lips.

"WHAT?" he practically shouted and Hermione's hand flew at once at his mouth to shut him.

Between the shelves of the old bookcase near them, she could see that almost every person in the library had lifted their head to look for the source of sound. Madam Pince had looked up from her table; her long nose had raised two inches above the book she was examining in her hands. Her large nostrils had flared up, as if she was a large mole, sniffing around to find the disturber. When she buried her face back inside her book, Hermione had looked back at Harry, who still had her hand plastered tightly over his mouth. He gently fought to remove her hand, holding her by the forearms and trying to push her away again, but to no avail.

Hermione knew he was too gentle with her and wouldn't hurt her, because then she would have to pay him back even worse.

Seeing him breathing deeply and slowly calming down as he stopped resisting and squirming, Hermione nodded and slowly removed her hand, fearing he would scream again and cause them to get caught.

"That was close..." she muttered under her breath.

"Hermione, how can she think that? I was right there! She saw me!" he hissed.

"Well, I guess that once she saw you there with Pansy and no one else was there, she thought she just happened to interrupt you on your 'Private moment' and whoever ask her to meet him didn't show up, so she left and now she's angry about that."

Harry leaned back against a wall to support himself from falling down at the news. "I can't believe it..." he said slowly. "But... it didn't even cross her mind that it could be me?"

Hermione shook her head sympathetically. "Not when Pansy was there, and especially not after she saw her kissing you."

"Maybe she was upset for seeing me with her?" Harry suggested hopefully. "After all, you said she was upset when she saw me hugging her on the train."

"It's a possibility, but she didn't say anything about it to me."

Harry sighed loudly. "How come I keep messing things up? How am I supposed to ask her out now?" He looked hopefully at Hermione for any sign of idea she might have. He needed to fix this. He needed to let her know that he was there and that he waited for her like he said he would. Pansy just happened to come in before her and things got out of hand. Ginny needed to know that he doesn't even like Pansy, he never did. It was always her. And now, his only chance of letting her know all that stood in front of him. Her face, however, was blank. Harry bowed his head. Hermione had done enough for him. He couldn't ask her that without making it look like she was helping him. It was either telling Ginny himself, or to forget all about it and not tell her at all.

Hermione seemed to read his thoughts. She put a supporting hand on his shoulder and said in a low voice, "You're the only one who can tell her that, Harry, but I'm afraid now is just not the right time or the right place for that. She's going through a lot right now. She needs some time to think."

"But what if I miss the right time and someone else gets to ask her before me?" he said in slight panic, the thought of Ginny going out with the blond Ravenclaw he hated so much gave him the chills.

"That's what I'm here for," Hermione said kindly, a small smile on her lips. "Don't worry, I won't let that happen," she added in a soothing voice, patting his shoulder in a calming manner.

He couldn't help but trust her. He knew she was only trying to help. She never owed him a thing and, yet, suddenly he has her by his side. He couldn't feel more grateful and yet sorry for ever misjudging her. He thanked her and turned around to the door.

"Harry," she called, not too loudly, but only so he would be able to hear her. He stopped and looked back, a questioning look on his face. "Can I be honest with you about something?"

"Sure," he nodded.

"Ginny told me what happened in her house at Christmas, you know, when your family came to visit the Weasleys... And frankly, she seemed excited about it at the time. So I wouldn't worry if I were you. You've still got your chance, even if it does take a while to happen, it eventually will," she said, her smile never faltering. "Who knows what tomorrow may bring, right?"

He mimicked her smile. "Tomorrow, hua?"

She nodded once with half a shrug. "Tomorrow."

He nodded quietly and walked out the door, feeling loads better than before.

Once he was out of sight, Hermione took a deep breath and made her way back to Ron and Ginny.

"Hey, there you are," Ron said cheerfully once he saw her. She sat next to him. "Took you long enough. I was just telling Ginny that I've begun to think you ditched us for that book..."

"Madam Pince said someone else had already borrowed it." She smiled sweetly at him, then leaning down and kissed him fully on the lips. Deep inside, guilt crept into her heart. She knew she did it because she needed to feel better about sneaking behind his back to help Harry get together with Ginny, despite Ron's objections on the matter. She had to make herself believe that he would always act this peaceful and loving around her, even when she finally decide to tell

him what she did. She at least had to hold onto something in case things get bitter, which she knew would probably will.

"What was that for?" Ron asked with a goofy smile as they pulled back. "Not that I complain, of course."

She shrugged innocently. "I just remembered why I love you so much."

Ron smile genially and kissed her again. "Aww, if I knew you liked it when I call you 'Bookworm,' than I would have called you that all the time."

She laughed lightly as he hugged her closely to his body and nibbled her neck in affection. She gave him a playful shove in the chest. "Ron! Not in front of your sister!" Hermione said lowly, a blush on her cheeks and a twinkle in her eyes.

"Exactly," Ginny chimed in, her eyes buried in her book. "Listen to your girlfriend, Ron, she's suppose to be the smartest witch of her age."

The couple laughed at the comment, but then quickly forgot Ginny was sitting with them. "Will you love me always?" Hermione whispered, putting her arms around Ron's neck as he pulled her to sit on his lap. "No matter what?"

"Always," Ron repeated genuinely. "No matter what."

She then pulled back, just enough so she could put her hand in front of him. She stuck out only her pinky. "Pinky swears?"

He drew back with wide eyes and looked between her face and her presented pinky several times before she felt his chest starting to shake with laughter. "What?" he chuckled, clearly thinking she went insane.

She sighed impatiently, little disappointed that he managed, again, to ruin a perfect moment, but she knew she oughtn't to blame him for not being familiar with this Muggle custom. "Just take the pinky."

He slowly reached his hand to grab the tiny finger, but she chuckled and before he could hold the tiny finger in his palm, she locked her pinky in his. "Like this. It's an oath to life, like an Unbreakable Vow, only it's not dangerous."

"Oh," he said stupidly as they shook their fingers together. "Well then, Hermione Jean Granger, I promise I would love you always, no matter what."

Hermione hugged Ron again, but quickly pulled away back to her seat as Madam Pince started to patrol the library.

Ginny's eyes lifted to look secretly at them. Instead of feigning to be puking, like she would do on other circumstances, a sad smile of jealousy had fallen on her lips, completely hidden behind her book.

It was Friday's lunch break and Harry, Draco and Blaise were exiting the Great Hall after a delicious meal as always. They had Defense Against the Dark Arts next. Harry was quite looking forward to that, since he could see Remus again. He had been absent from the rest of the week's classes due to his full moon transformation. He had been ill ever since they'd come back to school, and Harry felt horrible not going to visit him after the full moon ended. He wanted to go and apologize when he saw him this morning sitting at the staff table, but thought he would postpone it until the actual class, so they'd be able to talk more privately.

As Harry looked at his watch, he saw they still had fifteen minutes left until the bells would ring. Blaise decided to walk his new girlfriend, Julia, to her next class, so Draco and Harry were left on their own. They started talking excitedly on their upcoming Quidditch match they had the following morning, exchanging ideas and techniques.

"The weather is supposed to be quite stormy, so we'll have to see which way the wind blows," Draco was saying animatedly. "That way, we could avoid Bludgers and the Chasers will know how and where to throw the Quaffle without it flowing away from our possession... and you're not even listening to me, are you?"

"Not really," Harry said distractedly, his mind somewhere else. His eyes fixed ahead on a beautiful redhead witch crossing her way through the crowd.

"Right..." Draco said slowly, rolling his eyes. He clapped Harry on the back. "I'll see you in class, then."

"kay..." Harry murmured, only half listening. All he could hear now was his own heart drumming in his ears enthusiastically. He didn't see Draco leave and suddenly looked around and found himself alone. Simply thankful he hadn't had his friends tailing him around, he went to follow Ginny through the hallway to wherever she was heading for.

He was drawn to her by an invisible force, which he couldn't understand himself. It was always like that when he saw her and he didn't mind it at all. The sight of her filled him with energy and being away from her felt like he could no longer take another breath.

"Hi Ginny," someone said to her.

Harry had looked up at the sound of the deep voice calling her name. It was none other than the two, still nameless Ravenclaw boys he saw the other night in the loos.

Harry cursed them silently, wishing they would leave her alone, so he would be able to talk to her. As they walked past her and Ginny looked up at the tall, blond one, Harry saw she was in a better mood this morning as she smiled up at them and her cheeks flashed red. She waved goodbye to them and for a second, Harry was sure he saw her rolling her eyes. His heart skipped a beat. Still oblivious he was following her, she kept walking, only a short distance away from him. Harry cast a dark look at the two Ravenclaws, but he kept walking after Ginny even so. He just had to see her the more he could and to make sure no other bloke would come five feet from her.

She stopped and turned to open a door on the end of the hallway and silently slipped inside, the door closing shut behind her.

Without even realizing it, Harry walked towards that door. Everything Hermione had told him yesterday in the library had seemed to vanish from his mind. Everything, except one word: "Tomorrow."

This is the right time, Harry told himself. She's finally alone, she's totally carefree. Finally, after so much agonizingly long time, he would be able to tell her everything and at last, ask her out on a date.

He stopped before the door, looking pointedly at the brass handle, hesitating whether to press it and open the door or to wait for her to come out. Questions flooded his mind. And what if she won't come out? And how long exactly will he have to wait outside? Is she really alone? And what if she was asked to meet someone inside?

Shaking his head and gripping the handle tightly in a shaking hand, he took one, deep breath and pressed it down. In one swing, he entered inside. The last thing he expected was to hear screams. At first, he was sure he entered a room full of Banshees, but as a red flash missed his ear by an inch, he blinked and quickly realized where he really entered – the girls' loos.

A group of furious girls were glaring at him with their wands pointed threateningly at him, a few were still screaming and shrieking hysterically at his intrusion. He quickly looked around the room. Behind the group of girls, who were now slowly closing in on him, he could see Ginny's back to him, her face only visible as she looked at him through the mirror she was facing. A frown was visible on her pretty face, as she was obviously thinking 'What are you doing here?' The next thing he knew, he was flying backwards and all his body was aching as he was knocked back into the opposite wall with a loud thud when a series of curses hit his chest.

His body crumpled on the marble floor in a heap and his eyes shut tight from the pain. The screaming girls then stormed outside. "You pervert!" a few shouted and slapped him painfully on his already swollen cheeks before they ran off; the clicking of their heels against the marble floor and their faded, outraged murmurings were all Harry could now hear in the corridor.

Harry slowly propped himself up to his feet, shaking his head from the subsiding pain. He was thankful that no one else was around to see this embarrassing episode. He was sure that he looked like a total fool.

The door to the girls' loos stayed closed and no sound from within the room could be heard from where Harry was standing. Harry lingered in the empty corridor for a moment longer, as if checking it will stay that way and at the same time afraid that if he took another step closer, it would end up with him bleeding or covered with boils. He was about to leave when he was sure that there was nobody there anymore and that Ginny had already left with the other girls, but before he even had the time to take another step, the door to the loos swung open again with a creak and a head full of red hair poked outside. Ginny looked at the sign hanging on the door, clearly stating 'Girls Bathrooms,' a puzzled frown still on her face, then she turned to look around and spotted Harry staring back at her. She shook her head and disappeared back inside.

Harry felt even more stupid for not noticing this sign earlier before he barged inside. He rubbed his stinging cheek, which had returned to its proper size but still remained red, and walked back slowly to the door. Again, he hesitated whether he should open it or not. He decided to risk it. He now knew it would be just Ginny in there. The rest of the girls had already left. He pressed down the handle as silently and slowly as he could he opened the door, a mere crack so he could peek inside, just to be sure.

He was right. Ginny stood alone where he last saw her, still fixing her long, red ponytail in the mirror. Seeing she was completely alone, he let out an enormous sigh of relief and walked inside, the door swung shut behind him.

He didn't know whether she noticed him or not, and he wasn't sure what to say or how even start. "For a moment I thought I was the one who came to the wrong loos," she suddenly said, her voice confident and a small smile tugged to the corner of her mouth. Her brown eyes rolled at her image in the mirror. Harry remained silent, too transfixed watching her comb her beautiful, silky hair. It was like a tongue of fire and he yearned to reach out and run his fingers through it. "I mean, I

can understand that you got confused the first time, but since you're still here, I guess you have some big secret you've been hiding from everyone, hmm?" she teased, sniggering to herself as she watched his reflection through the mirror, a confused frown on his face. She turned her head to look at him and cast her eyes briefly at the direction of his pelvis, before she let out another giggle, turned back, grabbed her bag and thrust her comb inside. Harry, who felt nervous at her implying gaze, shifted in his spot.

He quickly tried to think of something to say. "It's nothing like that..." he stammered nervously. "I'm not hiding anything..."

She nodded in disbelief and hummed. "Yeah, right," she murmured under her breath.

"Hey, you can come and check for yourself, if you want!" he suddenly burst out, before he could even give it a second thought.

She looked at him then with scandalized eyes. Great, Harry thought faintly, she probably thinks I'm a complete madman. When he realized his mistake, his fingers ran through his messy hair as a raw blush covered his cheeks and ears. He hadn't meant for things to get this way. He came here to do something and he was going to do it, no matter how hard she was going to make it for him.

He stammered an incoherent apology, but she swung her bag over her shoulder and turned for the door.

"No thanks, I think I'll pass," she said sarcastically. "I'm not missing out on anything special, anyway..."

Harry pouted. "Will you ever stop mocking me? I came here to talk to you. I'm trying to be serious here, but you won't even give me a chance to —"

"Oh, I'm sorry," she cut him off with a tone of mock apology, a hand on her chest in a dramatic manner, and Harry made a 'see what I'm talking about' move with his hands. "It's just that a day without mocking you is not a very pleasant day for me."

She let out a loud snort and moved past him, walking out of the room, leaving him inside.

Harry felt angry. Why won't she just stop acting so childish and listen to what he has to say? He can't give up now; he has to do it, no matter what.

Harry opened the door and walked outside, running to catch up with her quick paces. She kept walking, not even bothering to look at him. He had enough of her ignoring him.

"Stop following me, or I'll tell the next Professor I'll see that you entered the girls' loos," she warned.

He ignored her comment as if she didn't say it, still walking beside her, fully determined to get this all over with. "I was thinking about something..." he started, packing up his courage and giving it a try.

"Oh really?" she interrupted once more. "I didn't know you were capable of thinking..." she teased again.

Harry took a deep sigh, taking it all in. He went on, pretending he didn't hear her. This was just another thing about her that he needed to get used to: her sarcasm.

"I... I wanted to ask you something," he stuttered, his forehead now prickling and clammy with hot sweat. Don't back out now! he told himself. "Do you think... there's a chance that maybe... you... you would go out with me? On a date, I mean," he finished rather lamely, but a great sensation of euphoria washed over him. He finally said it! He felt like he can do anything after saying that. There wasn't any way in the world that would ruin this for him now.

Ginny suddenly came to a halt, and Harry, noticing that a second later, stopped as well, only two feet away. She looked up at him with a blank look on her face. He looked back desperately at her, maybe sincere even, silently begging that she will say something in return. The anticipation hurt like a whip as the seconds rolled on. He thought he was breathing shallower or that his heart stopped beating when her lips curled into a smile. Any second now she would run to him

and throw her arms around his neck and happily exclaim that finally, after all the time she waited to hear him say it, it finally become real. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his dried throat. The realistic dream he just ran through his mind didn't happen, unfortunately. Instead of running towards him and shower him with kisses, she let out a sudden chuckle. Harry's eyes changed into a shape they never had before.

"Yeah, right," she said sneeringly, obviously not taking him seriously. He wasn't surprised; somehow he knew there is a chance she'd react this way.

She started walking again and Harry, not accepting her reaction as a proper answer, shook his head and went after her.

"I'm serious," he insisted.

Ginny held her face up, deliberately ignoring him. Occasionally, when she passed by someone she knew, she smiled kindly at them, and by that also presenting a show as if she has no idea why this Slytherin Scumbag was following her or even addressing her.

"Ginny," he tried again to get her attention.

Still not looking at him, she spoke out, as though talking to someone who's not really there. "I'm not listening to your lame attempts of winning some sort of a bet you had with your pathetic friends," she countered, she risked to look at him from the corner of her eyes before she went on. "Where are Malfoy and Zabini, Potter? Lurking around a corner or hiding in a cupboard?"

Harry was shocked at her words. Is this how she takes him for? "I didn't pull any bet with anyone!"

"Potter, if you were to ask me out for real, it wouldn't have been like this," she said. "And besides, I know for a fact that you're still seeing Pansy Parkinson and I don't care if you're denying it or not – I mean, if that's your taste in girls, than I consider her quite lucky that you even look her way – But, I just know you don't mean it, okay? So,

show's over, the gloves are off, you can stop acting the part of your life, okay, Drama Boy?"

"I can believe that's what you think..." Harry murmured, shaking his head as her hurtful words sank in. He couldn't take her 'no' and end it with that. He had to convince her, somehow, no matter how desperate and foolish he'd sound. "Is it so hard to believe that I actually do want to go out with you? I mean, I know that I've done some nasty things before, but is it fair to judge me for them? Don't I deserve a second chance?"

She bowed her head, having become speechless. Her paces slowed down until she came into a complete halt. Was he really telling the truth? And if he was, why hadn't he bothered to deny his relationship with Parkinson?

"Come on, Gin," he said gently in her ear. "Please go out with me," his voice was practically begging.

She contemplated what he just said and realized this was actually the first time she heard him call her that. No one ever called her that, not even her family. She admitted to herself that it had a nice ring to it coming from his lips. She raised an eyebrow. She couldn't be serious. He couldn't be serious!

She shook her head from all the incoherent thoughts that flooded her mind. No, don't go there, again, she ordered herself. She accepted the fact that she simply relived through her childhood crush and nothing more. She should forget all about it and move forward. People like Harry Potter, especially Harry Potter, will never find interest in a girl like her. She was a simple girl; there was nothing special about her. She had a horrible hair color that matched a carrot and her eyes color was a dull, plain shade of brown, something you can see on every second person you meet. She played Quidditch and pulled pranks on people. She barely wore makeup on, and she still wasn't accustomed to the fact that somehow boys were attracted to her. If they weren't, people would think she was a boy with long hair and a skirt.

She snapped her head at him and narrowed her eyes dangerously. "How many times do I have to say 'no'? Why can't you just leave me alone?"

She stuck out her lower lip in a pout and marched forward, hands swinging wildly at her sides.

For a moment, Harry thought the best thing to do was to leave her alone, at least for now. And here he thought he caught her on a good day, but he was clearly mistaken. Hermione was right; he should give her some time and space.

Only then, a voice spoke inside his head. He remembered something his godfather had told him over Christmas.

His eyes went wide as saucers as an idea popped to his head. He should do exactly what his father did. He never thought that his parents would help him when it came to girls' issues, but right now he couldn't be more thankful.

He quickly drew level with Ginny and called to her back, "I promise I would leave you alone if you go out with me. Only one date, that's all I'm asking."

She let out another hallow laugh. "And how does that make any sense, exactly?"

"Well," Harry said confidently, "I promise I won't bother you, chase you and won't even talk or cast a glance at you if that's what you want, ever again, if you just give me one chance."

"I still don't understand," she replied, stopping and looking doubtfully at him. Now she was sure he was complete mental.

Harry looked quite smug with himself, positively sure that his plan is going to work. "You see, I can promise you that I won't ever come near you again, but I can't promise the same thing about you to me," he said with a cheeky smile and added a wink.

She crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him closely. Her face supported something that looked like she was not impressed.

"Oh, you're so sure of yourself, eh, Potter?"

He nodded.

"You sure got a big ego. I don't know what made you think that I would actually agree to that? You must be really desperate to win that bet..."

Harry frowned. "I told you –"

"And I don't care!"

"So that's a 'no'?"

"It sure is!"

"You won't even consider this?"

She smiled lopsidedly. "Okay, you know what, let me think about it..." she made a fake thinking face, looking quite convincing when she started to rub her chin and look up at the ceiling as though it would help her decide. "Umm... NO!" And once again, she renewed her paces, with him still after her, still not taking rejection that easily.

He sighed, feeling tired of playing cat and mouse games. He was so sure she would agree this time. It worked for his parents, why hadn't it worked for him? Maybe things had changed in the dating world since the 70's.

"Why not?" Harry persisted.

"Because!" was her reply.

"That's not an answer!" he countered.

"Well, that's all you are going to get!"

"Just tell me why the hell not?" he now demanded.

She stopped for the fourth time. She gave up, but hadn't had the courage to look him in the face while she said it. "Because we're different, okay?" she said ever so softly. She wasn't even sure he heard her, so she spoke louder. "It's because I'm a Gryffindor and you're a Slytherin. I'm milk, you're oil. We just don't mix," she indicated with her hands between them. "It could never work between us."

He huffed angrily, not quite satisfied with her answer. "That's a rubbish way to put it," he argued, knowing that he had softened her, even a little bit. "You just scared that it might actually work between us. I am just as scared, believe me."

"You don't even know me!" she said out of the blue.

He frowned again. He wanted so much to reach out and touch her shoulder, to spin her around so she would finally look at him. He didn't find enough courage to do that, though. "What's that got to do with anything?" He shook his head. "We can get to know each other better, won't we? That's all the point of a date."

She shuffled her feet on the marble floor, thinking of what he was saying.

"Besides, I already know more than you think I do." She looked at him questioningly. Thankful for the things Hermione had tipped him off, he said, "I know you like vanilla more than chocolate. I know your favorite color is pink, even if you can't wear it because it clashes horribly with your hair." He made a reach for a stranded red lock, yearning to touch the silky texture of it between his fingers, but she tucked it behind her ear before he even got closer, and she hadn't even noticed the gesture.

"I know your favorite animal is not a cat or a dog, it's a horse, even if you never actually seen one. I really know a lot about you, Ginny Weasley."

She began to stammer. "What is that? How do you know all that stuff?"

She knew she was panicking, but why? Those things were so innocent that she wasn't sure why she was scared. Maybe she wasn't scared, but she was definitely shaking, because she knew all the things that he just said were true.

A few times before, she had played with the idea that he was stalking her. He had denied, of course. Now she wasn't sure what all this meant. How did he find out all that stuff?

"No – I –"

"Who told you that?" she shot at him, now feeling vulnerable, completely exposed. Goosebumps erupted on her skin and she didn't like the feeling at all. She wrapped her arms around herself in attempt to warm her body from the sudden cold that hit her skin. It wasn't the actual cold of February (the hallway they stood in was quite warm, in fact) but a chill that she felt suddenly around her, creeping inside, radiating from the walls, from the air itself and into her body. She couldn't help but think that she went smaller in less than two seconds. He might as well just step on her and finish it, anything just to make this frost go away.

Harry noticed her reaction, saw her shiver, felt her fear coming out in waves and crashing into him. "I'm sorry – I didn't mean to scare you. I meant – It's a good thing..."

She then felt as though sunshine was appearing behind grey clouds. The warmth of his words felt nice, somehow, securing. He did mean well, she could tell. His voice was honest, she noticed. She never heard him this honest before. It was different, that's how she knew.

"Please, all I want is one chance – and I'm gone..."

She said nothing, simply gazing into air, looking at nothing special. She still refused to look at him, not sure what she'll see or on the contrary, what she will look like.

The bells chimed loudly, signaling the start of the class. Harry couldn't believe that fifteen minutes had gone by so slowly. It looked like hours had passed since he walked after her into the loos and until this moment when they were together in the hallway.

He didn't know what she would say. She changed so many times in those fifteen minutes. The bells rang, that's it. It was time she would give him her answer. Would she nod her head and say okay, and then all the exhaustion, all the chasings, the pain and restless nights will be gone, or would she turn away and say 'no' for the last time?

He was sure he saw her head make the slightest of movements, but couldn't make of it. She shook her head more forcefully, and a glint of apology in her eyes. "You already have someone," she said in a cracked voice. "You don't need me."

Without further words, she took off again to her class, this time Harry stayed put in the empty corridor with his shoulders slacked, and feeling more of an idiot than he ever felt before.

It was time to go for dinner at the Great Hall, but Harry was too depressed to get out of his bed. He lay on his back, facing the green canvas ceiling of his four-poster, thinking how he could fix this situation he got himself into. He couldn't think of anything he could do. He knew he messed up enough and he didn't think there is a way to make it better, the damage was done. Ginny had rejected him for the last time.

He sighed and pressed his palms to his eyes, wishing it all was a dream and that he'd wake up soon.

"Can you believe her?" Blaise's voice suddenly barked from the other side of the room.

"Who?" Harry asked, not really caring.

"Pansy, that's who," Blaise said furiously. "She sends me a letter and guess what it says?"

Harry groaned loudly. "Argh! I don't care!" he snapped. Silence fell through the room at once. It appeared to be that Blaise was speechless and in a state of shock at Harry's sudden outburst. "I'm sick of hearing of Pansy! I'm sorry I ever met her, okay?"

"Yeah, so am I... But..." Blaise said slowly, now looking carefully at Harry. "Are you okay?" he asked with wariness.

Harry propped himself up on his elbows, glaring at his friend. "Just peachy," he said sarcastically. He got up from the bed and strode to the door, but bumped into someone.

"Watch where you're going," Draco snapped. Harry pushed past him, not sparing him another glance. Draco looked after him and then exchanged a questioning look with Blaise at Harry's peculiar behavior and without even thinking too much about it, they followed his track.

"Harry," Blaise called just when Harry left the common room. They quickly ran to catch up with him. "What happened? What did Pansy do to you?"

Harry let out a low growl. "Only made my life miserable..." he muttered.

"Why?" Draco asked.

"I don't really want to talk about it," Harry retorted. He felt miserable knowing Ginny was still sure he was with Pansy. It was one of the reasons she rejected him.

They reached the entrance hall and were about to go to dinner, when a female voice called Harry and he stopped, groaning loudly. He doesn't need this right now.

"Potter, I'd like to have a word with you," Hermione said from behind, her voice sounding cold and official.

"Well, that's too bad, Mudblood," Draco interrupted, before Harry could even answer. Something inside Harry snapped despite his lack

of interest in what Hermione had to say, he still felt a twinge of anger when he heard how Draco had just addressed her by. He turned to look at his friend with a glare in his eyes. Draco had a winning smile plastered to his face. Hermione, however, looked offended by the comment. Luckily enough for her, she appeared to be without Ron, for a change, or else, Draco would have probably be facing the end of his wand by now.

"Don't call her that," Harry ordered in a cool voice.

Draco's smile faltered, his face twitching angrily and Harry could hear Blaise let out a long whistle. "And since when do you care how I call her?" Draco demanded, sounding insulted.

Harry chose to ignore the question and stick to his defensive tone. "Apologize to her now," he said coolly.

Hermione glanced between them, unable to speak and not sure if it would be wise to interrupt them, she just gaped at them. Blaise looked at them as well, not sure what to say, he remained silent himself.

"I will not apologize to anyone!" Draco insisted. "I don't know what's wrong with you today, but I have the sudden feeling that you're not the person I used to know!"

"No," Harry said emphatically, shoving an accusing finger into Draco's chest, causing him to take a minor step back. "You're not the person I used to know!"

Draco gripped his wand tightly and shoved Harry's hand away with a look of disgust. "Don't touch me!"

Blaise seemed to sense the danger approaching and flung himself between his two friends, trying to separate them, but Harry was too mad. He was sure he could burst out at any second and it will not look pretty. He was sure he managed to remain clam, but still, as Blaise touched Harry's chest while trying to keep him back from Draco, a sudden force erupted from Harry's body and Blaise flew back and hit the floor hard with a struggled moan.

A crowd of students gathered around them in circle at the sight of Blaise flying through the air, all eager to watch a duel, pushing Hermione behind. A gale of anxious whispers filled the hall. Harry pulled out his wand, ready to defend himself in case Draco will shoot a spell at him first. "You don't want to fight me, Draco," he warned.

"Oh, that's right," Draco chuckled mockingly. "They called you 'The Best Dueler in School,' didn't they? I wonder if you were worthy of that name, because I think you forgot who overcame you with your own technique back at Christmas..."

Draco stood there proudly, puffing his chest with a smug grin on his lips. The crowd let out a mutual gasp. Harry shot him a fierce look. "You were under the Imperius Curse, if you can't remember, Draco! You weren't yourself!" Another loud gasp erupted from the crowd along with some murmuring and hurried whispers. People covered their mouth as they spoke into the other's ear.

It looked like all the air in Draco's lungs had gone at once. For a second, he resembled the small, scrawny boy Harry remembered him being the first time they met. Draco was nothing like that boy anymore, Harry knew; he'd grown up and so was his strength.

It was now Draco's turn to shoot him a deadly glare. Harry knew he went too far by telling the whole school what happened to Draco, especially when he made so much effort in keeping it quiet until now, but it just came out of his mouth before he could give it a second thought.

"How DARE you?" Draco screamed, red sparks shooting out of his wand. Harry tightened his grip around his own. "You've become nothing more than a... a rotten Gryffindor, that's what you are!"

"Is that your best, Draco?" Harry taunted, causing Draco to point his wand at his chest. Harry hadn't moved an inch. "Enough with the house rivalries!" Harry growled though gritted teeth. "You hate your father, Draco! You don't want to be like him, to go in his way. Why do you still bother so much to hate Gryffindors or Muggle-borns?"

"I still got my Slytherin Pride, unlike you," Draco countered. "This is me, the real me, if you happened to have forgotten. A true Slytherin should honor his house, to be proud to be chosen to be like the great Salazar Slytherin! And you – You are nothing like us. You were different from the very beginning, you never fitted in. Yet, I made sure you won't feel different. I made you my friend and this is how you repay me?"

Harry was stunned. Draco's hurtful words had stung him like knives. He wasn't sure what to say or if he should even say anything at all. Draco went on, "First you act like this, then you defend Mudbloods, oh, and yes, let's not forget how you fell in love with a Weasley."

At that, deadly silence fell about the room and Harry felt himself freeze up. His heart slowed down and he was sure it actually stopped beating completely. All the air in his lungs had ran up in one single exhale and he was sure he was shrinking to the size of a house-elf. Everything around him stood still and looked suddenly so big. Even the whispers from before had evaporated like smoke.

As his eyes shifted around, slowly searching, so slowly he thought he had aged in several years, he found Hermione's gaze locked upon him, peering from behind the crowd, her own brown orbs were now quivering and rimmed with tears, her face featured an apologetic expression. Then there was a soft sound, much like a squeal, and every head in the hall had turned around, including Harry's. Through a narrow gap in the crowd, Harry could spot a short redhead girl with a hand clapped to her mouth and wide brown eyes. A blink of an eye later, she turned on her heel and ran off, Harry hadn't seen where to. Hermione turned around as well and disappeared after her.

A pained look crossed Harry's face and he bowed his head, too ashamed to look at his surroundings at the revelation in front of the whole school. He felt himself moving. As he went, Harry caught a swift glimpse of a blonde girl wearing Ravenclaw robes helping Blaise get up from the floor. Blaise stood up and swayed on the spot before he caught his balance again. He caught Harry's apologetic look and nodded understandingly.

Not sure where his legs were taking him, he pushed his way past the crowd and disappeared back into the dungeons, not looking back at anyone else; Draco remained on his spot, still looking resentful. He may have shouted some more, but Harry hadn't heard him, or was it that refused to hear him, Harry hadn't known himself. People started talking in whispers again as they made their way to dinner, but Harry didn't care. It wasn't the first time they talked about him and it surely wouldn't be the last.

The clock by her bed was ticking too loudly, she thought irritably as she lay awake in the dark. Shifting the red curtains aside and peering out at the annoying object, she saw it was after one in the morning.

She groaned aloud; too troubled to catch a good sleep, she flung back into the bed, staring into the nothingness surrounding her.

She lay in her bed since dinner time. She didn't feel like talking to anyone at the moment. She had wanted some time alone; to contemplate what happened that night. Hermione had tried to get her to talk to her, but gave up after Ginny started to yell at her to leave her alone. She even pretended to be asleep when her roommates entered the dormitory after dinner, so they wouldn't ask her any questions.

Now, the steady breathing of her roommates did nothing but make her jealous. She wanted to sleep, to simply get away from everything that happened that day, but her own body betrayed her by not being tired at all.

It was like she drank too much coffee. The energy she held in her came out of nowhere and would not fade away. She drummed her fingers anxiously, as if waiting to something to happen, but all she did was going over things in her mind that she couldn't deny or get away from anymore.

It was as though watching it all through a Pensieve, as the events swept upon her one after the other:

How they started a row, the way he suddenly kissed her, the smack of the slap when she hit his cheek still rang through her mind, how

she heard him tell Snape that she put a spell on him, and how good it felt when she "rewarded" him for it.

Since then, he wouldn't leave her alone. Everywhere she went, he was there: In hallways, in the library, outside in the grounds, in Quidditch games, the hospital wing, the Great Hall, in classrooms. Everywhere. "It's like I have a tail with its own name, and its name is Harry Potter!" she remembered herself saying.

Sometimes she couldn't even stand him. He was an insufferable git. It happened to be in times like when he hung around with his friends or kissed Pansy Parkinson in front of the whole school to see. Other times, he could have been considered even as normal: like when he came to apologize for the stupid things he did or when he was nice enough to come to her and return her the diary she'd forgotten in the library, or when he stood up for her in front of Dean, and when he complimented her and called her beautiful.

She remembered how he came to her that morning, so determined that she would agree to his question, to go out with him. He wouldn't let it go. He pressed and pleaded her to consider, but all she did was to say 'no' over and over. She wasn't sure why at the time, but there was something sincere in his voice, the way he acted. Now she knew that there was actually a chance that he really meant it.

Ginny sighed. If she had a Galleon for every time someone asked her out this week, she'd had a fortune by now.

There was Potter, of course; Kris, the Ravenclaw boy Hermione had warned her about, who she would never consider of even letting him carry her books; the mystery guy, who was nice enough to send her letters and buy her a present, but she didn't forget that he also ditched her when he asked her to meet him! And of course, if you add Dean, Neville, Michael – and in case Luna was right about something for a change – Colin, too, than she might as well open a dating service!

She remembered the note she found in Lupin's class and the Christmas card when the mystery guy had called himself a Secret

Santa, and finally, the letter she received from him this week, asking her to meet him in the Owlery.

She didn't know why, but the word "Sorry" suddenly popped into her head. She frowned, thinking why she would relate her secret admirer with this word.

"Do you forgive me?" It was his voice, Potter's voice. Why would she remember it now? "I've asked for your forgiveness..."

"Oh, you mean your stinky 'sorry'?"

Ginny scratched her head, still deep in thought. Suddenly, she remembered Ron saying something about seeing something in Lupin's class one day. He wouldn't tell her what he saw, but now, as she was reflecting on it she remembered that the next day she found the strange note in the same class. Could this be related to what Ron saw in there?

She thought about the Christmas card again. Then the letter she received a few days ago. 'I tried a few times myself, but you never spared me a glance, you never took me seriously enough,' it read.

"You just scared that it might actually work between us."

Then, Malfoy's voice spoke up with the words that still made her heart all flutter funnily every time she thought of it. "Oh, and yes, let's not forget how you fell in love with a Weasley."

Suddenly, Ginny's head was spinning so fast that if the case was different and she wasn't lying in bed, she was sure she'd have fallen to the ground.

She bolted upright in her bed, like having just waked up from a nightmare. Her palms were sweaty, her heart raced in her chest and her breathing were as heavy as ever.

She took a deep breath to calm herself as she pulled out her wand and a piece of parchment from underneath her pillow. With a quick Lumos charm, a soft light flicked out of the tip of her wand. She

unfolded the slip of paper and stared at the words. Then she knew. Then she saw how everything made perfect sense, every piece of the puzzle had come together and the whole picture stood clearly before her eyes: It was the same handwriting. It matched perfectly to the letter he sent her months ago, asking her to forgive him for being so foolish after the Quidditch game. It was the same writing on the Christmas card and on the strange letter from a few days ago. That's why she related him to the secret admirer. They were the same person!

With an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach and the sudden urge to vomit any second, Harry entered the Great Hall on the following morning with his broom in his hand, ready for today's match as he'd ever be.

He ignored the looks people shot at him, and disregarded the longing in his chest to look over at the Gryffindor table to see if she was there, if she was one of those who were watching him.

Other than that, the room was buzzing with excitement of the approaching game. Students were chatting animatedly between themselves while having breakfast. Some were supporting banners and having painted their faces in their supported team's colors.

Harry felt like he couldn't even hold a bite of eggs, and that after he hadn't even ate dinner the night before. He was sure he'd be sick if he just tried to put something in his mouth, so as he sat down at his house table, he settled for only a cup of steaming tea.

It looked like no one cared about the snowy weather that welcomed them this morning when it involved watching a Quidditch game. People were as cheerful as ever.

As he cast a glance around the room, it was obvious which team the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were supporting, giving for the banners and signs with the Ravenclaw crest and witty sentences with pun and rhymes, such as: 'The lion roars when Ravenclaw scores!'

Harry's stomach grumbled, whether it was with hunger or anxious, he wasn't sure. He looked longingly at the various selection of delicious

food displayed on the table before him. He shook his head. He'd eat after the game was be over.

He was nervous because he knew it's not going to be a simple match; the weather was stormy like he'd predicted and he knew his team still hadn't acquired enough skill to play in such conditions.

His other teammates soon joined him in the table. Crabbe and Goyle, who to Harry looked like they were getting bigger by the day, stuffed their plates with everything within their reach, as usual. Blaise was chatting with the other two chasers about how he thought they should play today. Only Draco was sitting alone and quietly, playing with the food in his plate. Harry secretly glanced at him, wishing Draco would look up and catch his gaze, but he knew he was deliberately avoiding him. He was still upset about the fight they had last night. Harry thought he should feel angry with his friend as well, but he knew Draco only said those things because he was hurt. He knew some of them were true, but there was no time to talk this over right now. Harry knew the pain was just too fresh to mend before the match will start. He had already forgotten about everything Draco had said last night, but he knew for Draco it was different. He knew that no matter how much he apologized, Draco wouldn't listen. The only thing Harry was sorry about was revealing Draco's secret. He wasn't sorry for telling him what he thought, and Draco should know that.

Seeing the Ravenclaw team gathering up to leave for the pitch, Harry stood up as well and asked his teammates to join him. Together they walked to the changing rooms, while Harry tried to imagine how this game would turn out.

"Ginny, wake up! You're going to miss the match!" Hermione's voice rang behind the curtains of her bed. Ginny groaned in protest and pulled her duvet high above her head, snuggling deeper into her pillow, hoping that Hermione's voice would disappear.

"Lemme sweep, 'Mione..." she grumbled huskily. She didn't catch much sleep last night, and now, after she finally did manage to doze off for a few hours, Hermione was disrupting her again.

Hermione let out a chuckle. "Fine, I'll let you sweep later. I'll even bring Filch's cleaning tools with me, how about that?"

"S not funny," Ginny snarled sleepily.

"Ginny, come on! You have just a bit more than twenty minutes to get ready and go down to the pitch, or else, you're going to miss everything and I know you wouldn't want that!"

"But I don't want to get out, it's cold, and my bed is so soft and warm..." Ginny moaned.

Hermione clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "Ginny, you never missed Quidditch because it was cold before. Now, would you get out of there or do I have to pull you out myself? I swear that if I'm forced to do that, tickling will be included and it won't be pleasant, believe me."

Ginny heaved a sigh. Hermione knew too well how ticklish she was and to her misfortune, she took advantage of it. She pushed the covers off herself and while still in bed, she opened the curtains to see Hermione standing in front of her four-poster with a winning smile on her face.

"Fine, you win," Ginny said short-temperedly, not pleased that Hermione had won her over. "It's just... It's too embarrassing to show myself at his game after what's been said last night," she added quietly, rubbing her eyes off sleep. Her whole face flushed pink. She wasn't sure if she should tell Hermione what she had discovered.

"Ginny, you can't hide forever. You'll have to go out eventually. Besides, since when do you care what people think?" Hermione reasoned. "Weren't you the one who taught me to just ignore everything and focus on myself only?"

Ginny sighed again and propped herself on her elbows. "You're right," she said finally, looking up at her friend. "I might as well face it now or I won't ever have the guts to do it at all. What can I say? I'm a Gryffindor, after all."

"That's the spirit," Hermione said with a nod. She extended her hands towards her redhead friend. Ginny caught them and Hermione helped her get out of bed. "Now, you have five minutes to put some warm clothes on and get ready. I'll wait for you in the common room."

Ginny nodded and moved around the room in search for her clothes. Hermione crossed the room for the door, but before she reached it, she turned and looked back at Ginny. "You know, Ron was on Prefect rounds last night, so he isn't aware yet of what happened, if it makes you feel any better, and I also tipped off the boys not to say anything to him."

Ginny smiled thankfully at her. "It does make me feel better. At least he won't breathe down my neck. Thank you." And with a wave of goodbye, Hermione disappeared through the door.

Five minutes later, Ginny joined her in the common room, fully dressed and ready to go. They went through the portrait hall and took a shortcut that would lead them straight to the entrance hall.

Ginny stomach gave a loud grumble and she clutched it with her hands. "Bugger. I wish I had eaten something..." Hermione stopped walking and looked at her questioningly. "Would you mind saving me a seat? I'll just grab a toast or something from the kitchens. I'll try to do it as quickly as I can."

Hermione smiled, she didn't seem to mind at all. "No problem. I'll see you there." She waved her goodbye and went out to the snowy grounds.

As Ginny made her way to the kitchens, she looked outside the windows and wrinkled her nose. Her team was lucky not to play in such weather. She didn't fancy flying in a snow storm, freezing herself half to death while trying to find the tiny Snitch. As though reading her mind, a burst of icy wind came out of an open window. Ginny fastened her cloak tighter to her body and continued her path.

When she reached the picture with the bowl of fruits a few minutes later, she was about to tickle the pear, but before she could do so, the picture had swung open and outside emerged a group of five

Ravenclaws, a few were holding trays of food and drinks, the others held two baskets full of fresh, red tomatoes. The sniggered among themselves until they spotted that Ginny was standing in their way. As she took a good look at their faces, she recognized one of them.

"Ginny," he said, surprised to see her.

"Kris, hello," she greeted, surprised herself. She felt her cheeks warm up. "What... what are you doing here? Why aren't you at the match? It's about to begin."

"Yes, we're just about heading there. You aren't coming?"

"I hadn't had any breakfast, so I thought I'd grab something from here before going," she explained. She craned her neck to look behind him at his friends. "What's with all the food, anyway?" she asked curiously, pointing at the trays.

"Well, that," he pointed at the fancy desserts and Butterbeer bottles, "is for the after-party we're having at our common room later. I would've invited you, but," he bent down to whisper in her ear, a hint of amusement in his voice, "you see, you're not in Ravenclaw."

She took in a sharp breath, feeling a bit uncomfortable with his closeness, but still managed to chuckle lightly as he pulled away.

"Oh. Why are you so sure you're going to win?" she asked just as amused.

Instead of answering her properly, he simply laughed, his friends joining him as well.

Ginny secretly rolled her eyes. "And what about the tomatoes?" she asked, indicating the basket in his hands.

His smile only brightened. "That – is for the Slytherins."

Ginny frowned. "What do you mean?"

"For the past two days those snakes had been lurking on us in every corner. Wherever we went, they stuck out their legs so we'll stumble and fall, or they would shoot jinxes at us from behind. Our Seeker, Cho Chang, had gone this morning to the hospital wing after she couldn't stop hiccupping soap bubbles. So now, we prepared them a little revenge, you see..."

Ginny looked stunned. She knew some Slytherins were slimy, but never thought they would stoop down that low. "Really?" she asked in astonishment. "So who's playing as your Seeker today?"

Kris looked smug, as he always did. "Well, we cooked them a little surprised. His name is Lance Hastings, and I know it's mean to say, but I'm glad that Chang can't play today. I just don't know why he never tried out for the team, because he's fantastic!"

One of Kris's friends cleared his throat loudly. Kris looked back at his mates for a second, wordlessly telling them to go ahead, before turning back to Ginny. "Well, sorry, love. We've got to go. Cheer for us, yeah?" He reached his hand to caress her neck. "And think about what I said the other day, okay? I won't take 'no' that easily." He added a cheeky wink before he ran down the hall to join his friends.

Ginny shuddered at the feeling of his hand on her skin. She held herself so she wouldn't be rude and flinch right before his eyes. She touched the spot where his hand had traveled and she felt goosebumps appear on her skin. Now she realized why Hermione had warned her not to go out with him. He was a big git.

Ginny ran her fingers around her neck, suddenly feeling some sort of a string moving up and down her collar. She reached for it and pulled out the pearl necklace she received for Christmas. She almost had forgotten that it was even there. She let out a groan, remembering what she found out last night. It nagged her. She knew she needed to do something about it. She needed to go and talk to him.

When her stomach gave another angry grumble, she finally stepped into the kitchen and asked an elated house-elf for a piece of buttered toast. She left with a puzzled face as her thoughts drifted off to different locations, still thinking about her discovery.

She made up her mind: She'd go see him, ask him everything she needed to know. It was now or never.

Looking at her watch and noticing the time, she had less than ten minutes before the game started. She broke in a run to the grounds, barely aware of the heavy snowflakes falling down on her, wetting her hair and soaking in her clothes. She didn't mind any of that, however. All she wanted right now was to solve this thing once and for all, to confront him and hear him say exactly what she needed to hear. She needed that strict answer.

She ran to the field, the deafening shouts and cheers thundering in her ears, reminding her that the game is only mere minutes away from getting started.

In the distance, she could hear Dennis Creevey's voice, the commentator, welcoming everyone. She knew the teams would be out any minute now.

She sprinted to the changing rooms. The soaked grass, now covered with white patches of snow, splashed as her feet hit it with every step she took.

"It's a fine, cold day, but I hope that the Quidditch spirits will warm you up," Dennis called into the megaphone. "And Madam Hooch is calling the teams. Here comes the Ravensclaws!"

Inside the hallway leading to the dressing rooms, she could still make out the cheers of the crowd, but quite muffled through the brick walls. Her own steps echoed in the small space. Strong wind blew in her hair from the open doorway.

At the other end of the corridor, she spotted the Ravenclaw team standing in a group together at the exit to the pitch. They mounted their brooms and one after the other; they soared outside as each of their names was called. Ginny needed to hurry before the Slytherin team got out as well.

Then, the echo of voices filled the small passageway and a door to her right, only about twenty feet ahead of her, was pushed open and seven boys wearing green robes emerged through it, holding brooms and Quidditch gear. The first, leading them, was a bespectacled, black-haired boy, who was evidently scolding at the rest of his teammates.

"You better win this game," he said, somewhat threateningly, and it sounded as though it wasn't the first time he said it in the past hour. "Now, Ravenclaw is already 40 points ahead of us, but we can still change that. I want you to score more points, and not the whole winning will be based just on me catching the Snitch. I want all six of you there, playing as hard as you can, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Captain," Blaise Zabini muttered.

Ginny stood behind, breathless from her run and unnoticed as she watched silently as they walked closer and closer to the exit, ready to fly out to the pitch.

Dennis's muffled voice was now introducing Ravenclaw's new Seeker. "...And Hastings is looking quite ready to catch the Snitch today. For those who didn't hear, Cho Chang was unable to play today, but it looks like Hastings is a more than a fine substitute! Just look at him on that broom! That boy can fly! I must say it looks like Ravenclaw knew what they were doing when they added him as a reserve!"

"Wait, what was that?" Zabini suddenly asked, sounding outraged. "Did you hear that, Harry? They've got a new Seeker! Those bastards! Where the hell is that Chang girl?"

At that, Crabbe and Goyle snickered to themselves.

"Oh, great. What did you do?" Harry asked the two of them. They simply shrugged, but still held a satisfied smile on their fat, ugly faces.

Ginny, who was too nervous they'll be gone before she'll get the guts to do what she came here for, took a deep breath, packed up her courage and cleared her throat loudly. "Erm – Excuse me? Pot... Um, Harry?" she stuttered, unsure of what name to call him by. She didn't

know why she decided to choose his first name instead of his last like she normally would. She expected it to sound strange, that her voice somehow will quiver, but it came out nice and smooth and it surprised her that it didn't sound strange at all.

Seven intimidating and curious faces looked back at her. Harry's eyes had widened in surprise since he didn't expect to see her. She felt uncomfortable at their stares and her face warmed up. She knew that compare to their muscular figures she must look too small and scrawny.

"What she's doing here?" Malfoy leaned over to Blaise and hissed in his ear.

Blaise smiled brightly. "Probably came to kiss him good-luck," he muttered back.

Harry, who apparently heard them, cast a narrow glance their way, before he pushed his way past them, an intrigued look on his face.

"What is it?" he asked her coolly, as though not sure what else he could say to her. It was funny. Just yesterday he chased her around, and wouldn't shut up. And now he was shy because he was around other people. She wondered if maybe he was only trying to look macho around his friends. Did they know how he had talked to her just a day ago?

Ginny shifted her weight from one foot to another, still feeling nervous and shaky. Maybe it was due the fact that her hair was full of snow, her jeans were drenched with freezing water and wind blew all around her, or maybe it was only because she could finally have her answers. He was looking at her too intensely for her to speak clearly and confidently. "I... I need to talk to you," she said breathlessly.

Harry seemed to ponder this for a second. Dennis was now calling for their team, and a small amount of cheers mixed with a vast of catcalls had followed his voice.

Harry looked hesitantly back at his waiting, impatient teammates, before he looked back at her.

"Harry, they're calling for us," Blaise said.

"I know. Go, one by one. I'll be right after you. It will only be a minute," Harry replied, his back now to them.

Malfoy looked affronted. "There's no way we're –" he started aggressively.

"It's not something to argue about, Draco! Just do it!" Harry countered, cutting him mid-sentence.

Malfoy looked as if he was about to kill. He shot a nasty glare at Harry, but Zabini put a hand on his shoulder, pulling him to the exit with the rest of the team.

Harry looked at his retreating team and bounced on the balls of his feet. Slowly, he looked back down at Ginny's face, his features softening from a frown at once. "I know you want to talk, but can this wait after the game?"

No, she thought fiercely to herself. It can't! I waited too long for this and I'm going to get my answers now! And to sod with the bloody game!

But she nodded instead. "Sure. I'll wait for you out here after the game, if that's okay."

"That's fine."

She nodded again, just one nod, to confirm her agreement. He lingered a second more, just looking at her, then turned around without another word and hopped on his broom and flew outside just in time when his name was called.

The game could never have gone any worse. They had never played this terrible in all the years Harry's been on the team. Harry was so angry that he didn't say even one word to his team when they went back to the changing rooms after the game had ended: 210-70 to Ravenclaw, of course.

He took a warm shower while trying to clear his mind off his anger, but he couldn't shake the feeling off his shoulders.

Draco did it on purpose, Harry thought with a frown. He obviously was still mad at Harry from the previous night's events. He let the Quaffle enter the goal posts several times, pretending he didn't see it coming his way and Harry had called a time-out. All he could do was to shout at Draco that it was not fair for the rest of the team to lose points just because he was angry at him, and that he shouldn't let personal matters effect a Quidditch game. Draco hadn't even listened.

Blaise, too, had played poorly today. He seemed unfocused all during the match; his throws were too soft and he collided into someone else at least three times. He never even once had managed to score the Quaffle. Harry had guessed it was all because he had a row with Julia just before the game, which Harry had witnessed. They had fought about who she should support in this game. Apparently, she was confused about it since she was in Ravenclaw house, but dated a Slytherin.

Harry also knew he couldn't judge the poor performance of any of his teammates without being angry at himself as well. He knew all too well that he wasn't as focused on the game as he should have been. All he could think about was the short encounter he had with Ginny just before he flew into the pitch. He wondered why all of the sudden she wanted to talk to him. Instead of searching for the tiny golden ball, he was flying around without any actual desire to play. Without even noticing, the game was over as the Ravenclaw Seeker had caught the Snitch.

The weather didn't help them much, either. The Bludgers Crabbe and Goyle aimed at the Ravenclaw Chasers lost their track, thanks to the blowing wind, and accidentally they hit one of their own players, nearly knocking him off his broom.

And finally, the Ravenclaws had started throwing tomatoes at them, resulting yet another pause in the game as Madam Hooch blew hard on her whistle and Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape had

all come to separate a large group of Ravenclaw and Slytherins who started to shoot hexes at each other.

After Harry finished his shower, got dressed in his regular clothes, he grabbed his broom and stepped outside. Out in the hall, he could hear Blaise and Julia having yet another row. She didn't look quite pleased with Blaise and had slapped him on the cheek and quickly stormed out after he accidentally had said something really nasty to her.

Harry was on the verge of a quick getaway, wanting nothing but to avoid his teammates or any other Slytherins, for that matter. He was just about to escape from this place when a small figure appeared in front of him. For a second, he had forgotten that he agreed to meet her after the game. He halted and looked down at her, not saying anything.

"Is it a bad time?" she asked in a small voice, her slender fingers fidgeting anxiously. "I mean, I know you lost and that you're probably not in the mood to talk right now. I understand, really, if you don't want to do this."

He shook his head. He really wanted to hear what she had to say. "Yes, your timing couldn't have been any worse, but we can still talk. Not here, though."

She gulped hard, nodding nervously. Silently, they walked back into the castle. They found a vacant bench in a nearby hallway, which was thankfully deserted and they sat together, still not sharing a word or a glance with each other.

Harry wasn't sure if he should speak first. He didn't know what to say. He glanced up at her, wanting to ask her what she wanted from him, to urge her to start, but he was transfixed by her beauty, by her closeness. There were snowflakes in her hair, dotting it in white. Her face was flushed pink and her gaze was focused on her lap.

"You have snow in your hair," was all he could say. It slipped off his mouth without even realizing it.

Then she looked up, a puzzled expression on her face. She reached with her hands to her silky red hair, trying to brush it off. When she thought she had everything cleared off, he noticed she missed a spot.

"Right there," he pointed at the still lingering flakes. When she didn't find them, he slowly and cautiously reached out and cleared them off. The touch of her soft hair on his fingers was heavenly and he resisted the urge to run his fingers through the length of it.

"Thank you," she said sheepishly, and if it was possible, her cheeks turned a brighter shade of red.

He thought it will be wise to break off the tension by making her talk. "So, what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

She sighed. "I was thinking how I should put it, so it won't sound different from what I intended, so I'll just ask it."

"What is it?" he pressed gently.

She looked him straight in the eyes when she spoke. "Why did you ask me out?"

Harry honestly didn't expect her to ask this question. Not sure what to say, his mouth let out only incoherent stuttering. "I – I – Why – Why do you ask?"

"Just answer me, please."

"I –"

"Is it because of this?" she asked, and then she reached into her robe's pocket and a second later she pulled out something brownish and wrinkly. Harry took a sudden intake of breath when he realized what it was and she must have noticed it because she then said, "What is your connection to this note?"

He wasn't sure if he didn't know what to say, or just couldn't. All he knew was that his throat had betrayed him and went completely dry.

Every word he wanted to say will not perform a sound if he opened his mouth.

She didn't wait for him to reply, for she pressed on, unfolding the note and looking at it carefully. He looked down at it, remembering the last time he saw it, when it was smooth and new. "This note – Did you write it? Is it yours?"

He shifted his head away from her, unable to look at her as a pained expression crossed his face. His voice was unlike his own, throaty and dry. "What if I tell you that yes, it is mine? Would you believe me? Or would you just laugh at my face and reject me again? It doesn't matter anymore, Ginny. It's over, it's in the past now. You rejected me enough times for me to give up on this surreal dream that something could ever work between us."

She remained silent. Harry was sure she was choked with tears, for she had wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She only emitted a lonely sniff.

Harry reached for the pocket in his robe. His fingers clutched something square and thin, fumbling with it for a moment while thinking if it would be wise to give it to her. "Here, take it," he said finally as he pulled it out and threw it at her lap, standing up at once.

Without another look back at her, he strode down the hall and disappeared behind a corner, leaving her sitting on the bench alone.

She watched him leave with tears in her eyes. She let out another loud sniff through her freckled nose and looked down at the thing that landed in her lap: another note, though this one seemed the same size of the one she kept with her, it looked quite old, but untouched, like it never been opened more than once or twice.

She carefully unfolded it, not sure what to expect to find in it. As her eyes scanned the words and the handwriting, her heart filled with emotion and a lonely, feeble sob escaped her lips.

This note was an identical copy of the one she had carried around with her, the one she had found months ago in Lupin's classroom.

Inside this new note were written six familiar words which she now remembered by heart:

'I'm in love with Ginny Weasley.'

She wouldn't take it. She wouldn't let him walk away like that. He can't just toss a note like that, confirming what she had suspected and disappear. He can't leave her to just deal with it as if nothing happened.

Ginny stood up from the bench and followed his path around the corner. The hallway she had walked into was deserted. How did he disappear so quickly? she wondered to herself. Where did he go?

Checking behind every door in the hallway, she was about to give up on looking for him when she reached the last one. Pressing down the handle and pushing the door open, she found him there, in a vacant classroom, looking out through a window into the view of the frozen lake with his back to her.

He didn't look back, but by sharp intake of breath and the way his shoulders tensed, she knew he had sensed it was her when she had entered the room even before the door shut behind her. She walked closer slowly, not sure what she would say.

"You followed me," he said quietly. It was not a question, but a statement.

"Well, you're not the only one who's allowed to follow people around this school," she said half-amusedly.

He chuckled softly. "I guess you're right," he said, still looking out the window. "But there's no reason for you to be here..."

"I still hadn't got all my answers," she explained.

He didn't move, and she stayed behind, but not too far, yet not too close. Softly, she let the words escape her mouth again. "So, this is not a joke, I take it?"

He shook his head slowly and looked down at his feet. "No. I may have done stupid pranks before, but I would never joke about something like this."

"So you wrote it because you meant it?"

"Of course. I still mean it."

"Are you serious?"

His head looked up from the ground to the ceiling and it appeared to her that it took him a great deal to not burst out at her again. Another intake of breath and he turned his head to the side, his body still not moving, and he looked at her from the corner of his eyes.

"Never been more serious in my whole life."

She felt herself choke up again, not believing what she was hearing. It seems so hard for her to process. She started to play with her necklace absentmindedly. "So it was you all along. You sent me the letters and the necklace..." she said quietly.

He turned back to the window and nodded again. "I did. And it looks as good on you as I thought it would when I first saw it," he said peacefully.

Harry forced his legs to turn around and face her completely. She was getting closer now, and for a moment he thought she was floating. Her footsteps were so soft he couldn't hear them clicking on the marble floor.

Ginny hadn't known what had drawn her nearer to him, but she felt her blood run fast in her veins and that was enough for her. She looked down at their feet and noticed she was mere inches away from him.

When she hadn't said anything in return, Harry gulped noticeably, packed up his courage and reached out to hold her cheek. "I love y—" But then she moved away at his touch and looked down again,

unsure of what had caused her to do it. It was a strange, new feeling she had never experienced before.

Harry thought he saw a stray tear roll down her cheek and fall to the floor, but the room was getting darker by the moving of the grey clouds to cover the winter sun, so he wasn't sure if he had witness it at all. She turned her back to him again. "I'm sorry... I don't..."

His hand, which he held in midair, fell down and so did his heart. He was so stupid. How could he actually think she will return his feelings? After all the things he said and done to her, he expected her to say she loved him back?

"No, I'm sorry. Forget what I said," he said and he tried to push her away and walk to the door, but she had suddenly managed to get his wrist in her hand before he would take off and disappear again and he stopped.

"Wait! Don't – Don't leave," her voice sounded somewhat pleading and he wondered why.

"Why?" he asked with pain in his voice. He refused to look at her. He didn't want to witness the pity in her eyes. "Why do you even want to speak to me after everything I've done to you? Why are you here, trying to talk to me and look me in the eye? I don't deserve been spoken to by you. I deserve to be kicked up the arse or been slapped or hexed, but instead you're standing here in front of me with your... your pretty, long red hair, and your chocolate brown eyes, and that innocent face you got and still you're here. Why?"

"Because –" she tried, but something stopped her.

"Why?" Harry pressed, more firmly and loudly.

She didn't say anything, and he was tired of waiting for an answer, there in the empty classroom, like some sort of an idiot. He tried to wrench his wrist away from her grip, but she was surprisingly stronger than he thought. Suddenly, she pushed him back against the window, his head hit the hard, cold glass with an echoing clunk and he was about to call out in pain until suddenly he couldn't see anything, he

couldn't think of anything and he felt his whole body freeze. What happened suddenly registered in his fogged mind and he felt his body begin to warm up inside as he felt her soft lips pressed hard against his, softly moving, encouraging him to return the kiss. He slowly closed his eyes and obligingly gave in to her.

It was like he was lying in a field full of flowers on a sunny spring day. The warm feeling filled him up from head to toe and it was a purely, amazing feeling. The touch of her lips was so soft he thought he was sure he was dreaming. This couldn't be real, that's all his head was telling him. She felt too good to be true, and smelled incredibly intoxicating. If this was truly a dream, than he never want to wake up.

He wanted it to last for eternity, but eventually she was one who broke apart first. He thought he heard himself let out a protesting moan, but all his attention was on her and he couldn't get his mind to stop spinning.

"You can open your eyes now," she said, her voice rougher than before, but there was still a hint of amusement to it. He realized his eyes were indeed still closed and when he felt her hands caress his cheeks, he opened them to see a small, satisfied grin on her lips. She looked absolutely beautiful like that, her eyes heavy lidded and her lips still slightly parted, looking glossy from their kiss. "I was afraid you were going to slap me again," he confessed and she giggled. She shook her head and then pressed her forehead to his and let out a sigh as she hugged him around his neck. His hands slowly traveled around the small of her back and he held her tight.

"I'm sorry about before..." she whispered. "I didn't know what to think... I was so confused. I didn't mind hearing you say it, but it suddenly became real and I was scared and when I realized I really hurt you I..."

"Shh..." he whispered back just as softly and he caressed her hair, savoring the amazing feeling of finally having her in his arms. "It's okay... you don't have to say anything... It's all forgotten."

He realized words were not important right now. Just being like this with her told him everything he wished to hear for so long.

"Say it again," she said quietly, as if afraid to speak aloud.

He knew what she meant and he held her face in his hands just like he wanted to do before and he made her look in his eyes, making sure she will know it was true. This time she did not turn away from his touch. "I love you. I love you, Ginny Weasley so much."

Now the tears he thought he saw earlier came to well in her eyes, but he knew those were happy tears, very different from the ones he saw escaping her eyes the night he first kissed her.

"I wanted him to be you all along, you know. This Secret Admirer, I wished it would be you. I thought of so many guys that he could be, but I never wanted any of them but you to be him. And then you came to my house and started to flirt and you almost kissed me; I almost gave in to you right then. And after I saw you playing chess with Bill something snapped... I don't know why. I guess I expected all my brothers to hate you and I was surprised Bill did see this good side in you that I see right now..."

He didn't say anything, but just tightened his grip on her body, never wanting to let her go.

He was scared she was the one who was playing a big joke on him and that any second now she would push him with a big mocking smile on her face and start laughing at him. Her brother would come in with a camera and snap a few pictures of his bewildered face, having a laughing fit at the scene. But none of that happened and she stayed embraced securely in his arms for long before he wanted to make sure this really wasn't a trick.

The soft flowery scent of perfume entered his nose, and he planted little kisses on her cheek as he spoke. "So, does this means you'll go out with me now?" and he felt her smile broadly at the innocence of his words.

A/N: A few things I would like to add:

1. This story doesn't end here, of course. There are a few more chapters to go!

2. I'm sure some of you have noticed that I changed the summary for this story. The old one just didn't fit anymore.

3. I already started writing the next chapter. It won't be as long as this one was, but I still don't know when I will finish it. Hopefully it will be less than ten months this time...

Anyway, that was chapter 16 you've all been waiting for! Now please tell me what you think! Your opinions are really important to me.

Chapter 17 – Broken Promises:

With a great buzz in his chest and the feeling of his blood rushing faster than ever, Harry let out a long sigh. Reluctant to admit it, he finally whispered, his voice soft and barely audible, "It's getting late." Running his hand lightly up and down her forearm, he also pointed out, "It's already dark outside."

Ginny looked out of the window from their nook on the floor and gazed at the bright stars. She could hear a faint hoot of an owl from afar.

She had been living in the magical world for sixteen years and probably saw everything a person could ever imagine and even more, but this day was nothing compared to charms breaking out from a wand or flying on a broomstick. This day, having spent most of it in Harry's arms, had been the most magical day she had ever experienced in her life.

Earlier, after what seemed like a good ten minutes of snogging, they'd realized they were still standing pressed to the cold window pane in the same vacant classroom they found themselves in after the game. Despite the many chairs and desks in the room, which they could have used, Harry removed his cloak and spread it on the floor like a blanket and cast a quick cushioning charm, so they would have something warm and more comfortable to sit on.

While Ginny's back was pressed tightly to Harry's chest, they were leaning against the teacher's desk and she refused to hold onto the fact that it was time for them to say goodbye for the day.

"Just five more minutes," she murmured and buried her head underneath his chin.

She then felt his chest shaking under her while he chuckled and squeezed her shoulders with a firmer touch. "I'm afraid to say it, but we do need to get back. I'm sure people are starting to wonder where you have gone off to." Yet, after saying that, he remained snuggled with her on the floor. The feeling of her this close to him felt almost unreal and he was afraid that any moment now, with a blink of an eye,

it would all disappear. He was glad, though, that even hours later, the scene hadn't changed. On the contrary, it had only got better.

"And you won't be missed by anyone?" she asked innocently, running her fingertips over the back of his hand and causing his skin to give a slight shudder. She smiled when she felt a spot of goosebumps erupt to his skin.

He let out a snort which made her chuckle at the sound of it. "I doubt it."

She pulled her head from the warmth of his neck and looked up to him, a mingled expression of concern and confusion in her brown eyes. "How come?"

"Well, maybe only by Blaise; I don't know. Draco and I aren't on speaking terms at the moment. You know, after last night's fiasco in the entrance hall and my slip-up, I really don't blame him."

Ginny looked stunned at him. "He was as much of a prat as far as I ever remember him being." Harry bowed his head and sighed. He pulled back from her and straightened his clothes. "He deserved that, Harry."

"I don't know if you've realized it yet, Ginny, but he's my best friend," Harry said as he got up on his feet. He extended his hand for her to take and helped her stand up, and with a wave of his wand he cleaned the dust off his cloak and wrapped it back around himself. After a moment of silence between them, he sighed again. "Let's not talk about it anymore, shall we?"

She nodded understandingly, and reluctantly changed the subject. "It's nearly time for dinner. Want to head down to the Great Hall?"

"Sure." He smiled and extended his hand, which she took without hesitation. The small gesture felt nice. She never thought she would be holding hands with him. She smiled when she saw their entwined fingers and felt warmth spread through her arm and all over her body. Everything was going well, but at the moment when they reached the

entrance hall, Harry paused suddenly and awkwardly let go of her hand. Ginny immediately missed the feeling of his touch.

"You know, I'm not really that hungry anymore. You go ahead inside. I'll go back to my common room," he said.

Ginny looked at him, confused. Looking from his face to his hands, which he shoved quickly into his pockets, she tried to think what might have caused him to change his mind so abruptly. She settled her gaze back on his face and frowned slightly when she noticed he had backed a couple of steps away from her. "Erm – okay... I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

He nodded and flashed a smile, which disappeared a moment later. She was positive she saw the faintest tint of a blush on his cheeks, but he instantly looked down at his feet, so it could have been only her imagination. He meant to turn around, and she stopped him with her Gryffindor courage and slight cheek in her voice. "Don't I at least get a goodnight kiss?" she said.

He chuckled again and looked up at her. Seeing her stick out her bottom lip out and playfully faking a pout, he couldn't resist the temptation growing in the pit on his stomach. With a genuine smile, he walked back to her, leaned down and kissed her lightly on the cheek, his lips barely brushing her skin. "Goodnight, love."

Before Ginny could react to him, he had pulled away, a smile still on his face. "Have – Have sweet dreams," she managed to say as sweetly as she could master as she tried not to sound as shocked as she was.

"Oh, I will," he said and with a wink he turned his back on her and walked towards the dungeons.

Trying all she might to convince herself that his sudden change in attitude was only because of the new change in their relationship was a new and exciting as it was to her, she shook her head and forced herself to focus on the good memories they had created together today.

"And where exactly have you been all day?" Hermione inquired when they climbed through the portrait hole. "Ron and I were worried sick."

Ginny smiled faintly as she remembered what Harry had said earlier about people searching for her.

"Hey, what's that smile for?" Hermione asked again before Ginny could reply to her first question. Her eyes narrowed to slits. "What did you do?"

"What, I can't be happy anymore?" Ginny replied, and a second later Hermione made a loud gasp and her hand went to her cheek. Resembling a fish, she opened and closed her mouth several times and before she could say anything, Ginny had cut her off. "Hey, what's going on there?"

She had pointed out to a gathering of people around the notice board. She walked hurriedly to join the crowd, with Hermione following her every step, and saw a notice of a new Hogsmeade trip set for the next weekend.

Ginny saw Lavender and Parvati backing from the group, giggling as Seamus Finnigan passed by them and was reminded briefly of the time before the Yule Ball. Normally, she would just roll her eyes at a sight just as that, but today's events had made her feel giddy herself. This would be a perfect opportunity to go on her first official date with Harry.

Spinning on her heel, she walked back to the sitting area and took a seat in a large armchair by the fire. Hermione, who was still walking after her, sat in the corner of the couch, the closest to Ginny and continued to gape at her.

"What?" Ginny asked innocently, faking annoyance, although she knew perfectly well why Hermione was gawking at her.

"Tell me everything that happened!" Hermione said in an undertone.

Ginny had made her best imitation of a thinking face. "Well, there's not much to tell... Luna and I went for a stroll with Hagrid around the

Forbidden Forest. We saw two unicorns and one Crumple-Horned Snorkack. I was really surprised at first to see one; I thought Luna, bless her, made them up –"

"Ginny! Stop it!" Hermione suddenly barked and Ginny couldn't help herself but to roll around in laughter. "Come on, tell me! You're all... glowing!"

Ginny's eyes widened and she laughed again. "'Glowing?' You're overdoing it, Hermione."

Hermione muttered angrily under her breath and meant to pull out her wand next, and in seeing her doing so, Ginny waved her hands in defense. "Okay, okay, I'll tell you! There's no need to exaggerate!"

Less than five minutes later, after Ginny had finished her story, Hermione had shrieked, jumped from her place on the couch and flung her arms around Ginny in a hug, truly happy for her best friend.

"Only one problem, though," Ginny said suddenly, after Hermione had settled down, her expression changing into more of a sad grimace. "I think he might be regretting it."

Hermione's eyes went as wide as saucers. "What do you mean?"

Ginny looked uncomfortably at the roaring fire in the hearth. "Maybe I'm just worrying myself... I don't know what happened. Everything went fine and we started talking, but he suddenly went all shy and distant. I don't know what might have caused him to change like that. I don't remember doing anything wrong..." But then she thought back on their wonderful day together. "Although..."

"What?"

Ginny cringed and sighed. "Merlin, I'm so stupid..." Ginny buried her head in her hands and mumbled out, "He completely opened up to me, told me that he loved me and I said nothing back."

"Maybe he understands?" Hermione offered. "Maybe he doesn't want to rush you, wants to give you time. Or maybe he doesn't care; he

might have been just tired, you know, after all the snogging you put him through today..." Hermione said cheekily.

Ginny chuckled and shoved her playfully by the shoulder. "Shut up!" she said with a giggle and was glad that Hermione was there to make her feel better. Making herself believe that maybe her best friend was right, yet again, she promised herself to deal with all consequences in the morning.

Somehow, before she went to bed, she managed to ignore the troubling feeling that there was something weird with the way Harry had acted earlier.

As Harry stepped into the common room, the first thing he saw was Blaise sitting alone in one of the high-backed chairs, staring blankly in the fire. As he walked closer to him, he noticed he held a tissue pressed to his nose and it was soaked with blood.

"Merlin, what happened?" Harry asked worriedly as he hurried to his friend, and sat next to him to take a closer look at his face.

"Julia happened," Blaise muttered sullenly and he picked up his wand, tapped the currently red tissue paper and a second later it was a clear white again. He wiped his nose with it as it started to drench with blood again. "The stupid cow hit me with a Trip Jinx and I stumbled and broke my nose, and now the damn thing won't stop bleeding... Needless to say is that we aren't together anymore. But that's a new record, you see. We lasted, what, three whole days? That's more than I ever got to be with anyone..."

"I'm sorry," Harry said honestly. He was suddenly filled with guilt about the wonderful day he had with Ginny.

Blaise waved him off. "No, I'm sorry. I should have listened to you, Harry. Maybe you're right. Maybe I was better off with —"

"You can't know that," Harry cut him. "You followed your heart, you did what you thought would make you happy."

Blaise looked miserably at the fire. "And it didn't and I ended up alone."

Harry looked around the common room and suddenly an idea popped to his mind. "You can still win her back," he said with a crooked smile. "Not Julia, I mean Pansy."

Blaise simply looked at him, a blank expression on his tissue-cloaked face. "Really? How?"

"Take her out on a date," Harry said simply.

Blaise snorted, and that was something he probably shouldn't have done, because a second later he cried out in pain and pinched his nose. "Oww..." he muttered under his breath and wiped at his nose again with his. "Now, that's a great idea, Harry!" he snapped and sniffed deeply once more. He slammed his hand to his knee as he pushed himself up from his chair and started walking about the room. "Why couldn't I think of that before? Oh! Maybe because I already know she won't even think twice to look my way again!"

Harry rolled his eyes and got up from his chair as well so he could match Blaise's eye level. "Fine, do what you think is best! I'm just saying that it's still early and you can still save the situation between you two with the bit of tact you still have!"

"That's rich, Harry, really. To make fun of me like that while I'm feeling down. No, I mean it, because I've just lost my last shred of dignity..."

Harry looked around once again and pointed at the notice board. "Look, there's your chance, another Hogsmeade trip. If you act all mushy and loving around her, she might agree to go out with you next weekend."

Blaise walked closer to the board and read the notice that was pinned to it. "You think so?"

"I know so," Harry said emphatically. "And even if she doesn't, one day when you become rich and successful, she'll come around," he added jokingly.

Blaise smiled. "What will I do that will make me rich?"

Harry considered this for a second. "You'll sell travel books in a small Muggle shop along with an old man with a bad spitting habit."

Blaise chuckled again and wiped his nose once more, finding it had finally stopped bleeding. "And how will that make me rich, exactly?"

Harry tried his best to look serious and not burst out laughing as they sat back on the couch. "Oh, it won't, but then you'll win the lottery and buy your own travel agency."

"And why in the Muggle world?"

"Because a Wizarding travel agency will make you go bankrupt. Why would you wizards and witches pay to travel around the world when they can use a Portkey, Apparate or simply Floo?" Harry couldn't help but chuckle by now and Blaise joined him heartily.

After calming down, they sat in a comfortable silence, each of them with their own thoughts.

"I'll ask her tomorrow," Blaise said finally.

"I would give it at least a day or two before asking. First thing would be apologizing to her. Tomorrow you'll do something nice, you know, like write her how you feel or even send her a flower. I found out girls like that stuff."

"Oh yeah? Like it worked for you?" Blaise asked mockingly.

Avoiding Blaise's gaze, Harry smiled contently despite the comment. "Exactly like it worked for me."

For a moment, Harry thought Blaise hadn't heard him. It took about a whole minute before the words finally sank in him. "Wait, what do you mean?"

Still leaning against the couch, Harry simply tore his gaze from the fire and looked briefly at his shocked friend before turning to look at the fire again, as if finding it more interesting than what he was about to say. "Yeah... I didn't want to say anything before, while you were still sulking over Julia, but I kind of have a new girlfriend now..."

Blaise looked even more stunned if it was possible. "No way! You're telling me you finally managed to catch the Weasley fish?"

Harry's smile faded. "Hey, Ginny's not a fish!" Despite himself, he couldn't help but let the smile grow back on his lips as his mind wandered around to think about her face and how beautiful she was and how sweet she tasted on his lips. "But yes, we're finally together."

Blaise looked impressed. "Good for you. Now, all you have to do is patch things up with Draco and your life couldn't be more perfect."

At the mention of Draco's name, Harry grunted. "Argh, don't remind me. Where is the git now?"

"Dunno. Haven't seen him since the match, but I guess he should come back any time now. Curfew is due soon."

"And what am I suppose to tell him? I still stand by what I said."

"I know, and I agree with you, but you have to accept the fact that this is how he is and that he's having a really hard time right now. We're still his best friends and we need to help him get past it, even if he is being a git in the process."

"Damn, I hate it when you're right," Harry muttered under his breath.

It was ten minutes later when Draco finally walked into the common room with Crabbe and Goyle by his side. Harry immediately stood up and Draco stopped to look at him and Blaise, who remained seated

on the couch, but turned his head around to look at him back. His nose had finally stopped bleeding, but he had nasty dark bruises underneath his eyes.

"What do you want?" Draco spat at Harry. "If this is about the game, you know damn well I wasn't the only one who played badly today."

Harry shook his head earnestly. "This isn't about the game. I think we need to talk about last night."

The look Draco gave him next made Harry feel as though Draco was looking at him like some sort of a stranger. "Potter," Draco said quietly and Harry knew he only called him that because he was truly angry. "As far as I'm concerned, after last night, we aren't friends anymore. We are housemates, teammates, classmates, whatever, and that's it. I can't have someone acting for six years like he's my friend and then stab me in the back just because he can't accept me for who I am."

Without saying more, he turned and walked towards the boys' dormitories, not even giving Harry a chance to say a word. Harry watched him walk off angrily with Crabbe and Goyle stomping behind like his two bodyguards. It was quite rare when the two of them had a real argument, even after six years of knowing each other. Harry wasn't familiar with the new stabbing feeling he felt in his chest. It was hard to think about it, but he actually feared that there was no way to fix things between them this time.

After having a restless night, he thought noting would make the next day easier for him, but everything seemed so much brighter when he saw Ginny approach him the next morning as he exited the Great Hall.

"Hi," she said with a smile when she finally reached him. Her hands immediately reached for his and instantly, a rush of warmth spread through his body when he touched her and he felt much better.

"Hi," he greeted back, as cheerfully as he could despite the circumstances.

"I didn't see you at breakfast, is everything all right?" she asked with slight concern to her voice.

Harry shook his head and watched as her eyes changed into a more serious expression. "But it is now that you're here," he tried to light up the somber mood.

Ginny's eyes bore into his, searching for some answer. "Oh. Do you want to talk about it, maybe?"

He shook his head again and looked down at their joined hands. "Not really."

Ginny felt him starting to get away from her again. She looked at him closely, waiting for him to look back at her. "Why are you avoiding me?" she asked quietly.

His head immediately snapped up and his green eyes met her brown ones. "What? I'm not."

Her gaze only intensified. "Yes, you are, ever since last night when we left for dinner. I don't know why you're doing this, but I wish you wouldn't. If you're regretting us getting together, then just say so!"

A moment later, she realized that she might have said it a little too briskly, but it was too late to take it back.

His grip on her hands loosened and he dropped her hands suddenly, but she wasn't sure if it was because she was too harsh towards him, or because she was right about him avoiding her. The look on his face only told her that she was completely wrong with her suspicions, as it simply reflected a total shock.

Harry's mouth dropped slightly and he wondered why she would think that. "I don't!"

Her voice intensified by the second and she couldn't stop herself. "So it's because I didn't say that I loved you back, isn't it? Or maybe it's because you're ashamed to be with me, that you don't want people to see us together?"

"What the hell are you on about? That's not true at all, Ginny!" he protested, matching her tones. "I don't know where did you come up with all of this, but I'm really not in the mood for all these false accusations, okay? I've had enough of fighting with people this week and the last thing I want to do is to fight you too."

The look of surprise mixed with guilt showed evidently on Ginny's face. She felt incredibly stupid and selfish. Of course this was about him, how could she ever think differently? Not everything was supposed to involve her.

"Harry..." she said quietly once again. "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Well, now you do," he said, his voice strained, but softening a bit. "And like I already said, I don't want to talk about it, so let's just drop it, okay?" He ran his hand through his thick, messy hair. "And what was this all about, anyway? Why would you even think that I regretted being with you?"

She looked down and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know what to think. Everything was going great until we went to dinner and then I felt like you changed your mind and searched for a reason to back out. I guessed that I panicked and jumped to the wrong conclusions and thought about myself only. I'm so stupid."

"No you're not," Harry said clearly. He wrapped his arms around her securely and pulled her into a warm embrace, right there, in the middle of the hall. He didn't care if the whole school saw. For him, they were there alone and this was their private moment together. "And don't ever let me hear you say it again about yourself. You, Ginny Weasley, are the most brilliant," he said with a kiss to her forehead, "— sweet," another kiss, this time to her closed eyes, "— beautiful," the tip of her nose was next, "— caring," and finally a longer one on her lips, "— and the strongest witch I've ever met. I don't care if anyone hears this, because I'm not ashamed of anything that is concerning you. I will scream it from the rooftops if that's what I need to do in order to convince you." She leaned her forehead on his chest,

feeling his heart drum fast and chuckled lightly, and he smiled at the sweet sound. "I just love you so much."

She suddenly stiffened in his arms and she hoped he didn't sense it. Hearing him say that was still so surreal to her. "Harry... about that..." she started hesitantly, and her voice trailed off, not sure how she should put it so he won't take offense by it.

"What?" he promoted her gently.

She took a deep breath and let it all out. "It's just that... You say you love me so easily and I know you mean it, but I haven't even said it back yet. I'm not sure that I... You're too good for me."

"Ginny, I don't want you to feel that you are obligated to say it just because I did. You have to mean it and I want you to take your time until you do. You'll say it when you're ready. Believe me, it took me awhile to admit it to myself. It didn't come right away."

She couldn't believe how lucky she was to have him. She simply couldn't believe it was all real. How she had ever mistaken him for being any different? He was so good to her and here she thought that he deserved better, that she wasn't enough. She didn't know what she did to have him, but she was more than glad for it. "Thank you. I should've realized how wonderful you are from the start."

He chuckled and ran his hands up and down her back and she loved the soothing feeling this small gesture had brought on her. She buried her face in his shoulder and sighed contently, savoring every feeling, every touch, every moment of it. "I wouldn't say that. I was a prat at the start, don't you remember? I couldn't even stand you couldn't stand me either. Well, that was until I kissed you..."

"I kissed you back," she said, somewhat shyly and Harry couldn't help but chuckle again and she joined him, realizing what was so funny.

"Yeah, now you admit it," he said amusedly. Then he turned serious again. "You know I meant every word that night? Well, only the good ones," he added once he remembered how they screamed their

lungs at each other that night, when they served that detention together.

"You did not!"

He smiled. "I did. And when I told Snape that you put a spell on me, well, that was kind of true, too. It was you, your spell, and I'm still under it."

"Why, Potter, are you trying to sweet talk me?" she asked and raised her head to look up at him. His eyes shone brightly when he looked back at her.

"It depends. Is it working?" he asked cheekily, a grin on his lips.

"Umm... no."

He nodded and his smile only widened when he caught her lie. "Umm, yes," he mimicked. He leaned down and caught her lips in his with another kiss.

Just when he thought that things can progress into something a bit more than a quick kiss, she gently pushed him away and backed half a step from him. He realized that he let out a protesting moan once she tore her lips from his and he fought the horrible blush that threatened to appear on his cheeks.

"I need to ask you to do something for me," she said at once, and when he saw the serious look in her eyes, all thoughts of protesting and continuing the kiss had fled away.

"What is it?"

She reached her hands to his robes and played with the button holes while she talked. "I hadn't had the chance to tell my brother about us yet."

Harry immediately caught on and nodded understandably. "Oh, and you're worried he's going to freak out if he catches us together."

"Freak out' would be an understatement, I'd say," she said. "He just doesn't know that you changed and how good you are like I do, and I thought that... that you might want..." she trailed off, wishing desperately for him to get the message, only this time, when she looked at him, he had a frown on his face.

"That I might want... what?" he asked.

She gulped rather obviously and looked over his shoulder, trying to avoid his eyes while she finished her sentence. "Might want to go and ask him for his permission to date me," she said rather quickly.

Harry's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "What? Why would I do it? Why can't you do it? He's your brother!"

She shifted on her feet again and bit her lip nervously. "Yes, but if it comes from you, he'll see that you're serious about us and he might change his mind!"

"Or hex me into a million bits of tiny pieces!" Harry offered.

Ginny waved him off. "Oh, he won't do such thing."

"Ginny!" he growled in protest.

"Harry!" she called and then she did the most adorable thing which he couldn't believe that this cheap trick was actually working on him: Puppy-dog eyes. "Please?" She batted her eyelashes at him. "For me?"

"Why do we even need his permission, anyway?"

"Because this is the only way we can go out without me feeling guilty about it."

He groaned. "Oh, all right." Even though he felt extremely nervous about it, he knew there was nothing else in the world that was worthier than the smile she just flashed at him.

"Oh! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" she called cheerfully and threw her arms around his neck, nearly toppling them both over, and she peppered his face with small kisses, until he caught her lips again and drew her into a passionate kiss, much more passionate than the one she had stopped a minute ago.

A sudden wolf-whistle had ruined the moment and they broke apart, looking around for the source of such rude behavior. When they saw who it was, Harry's palms began to sweat and Ginny felt a large lump rise in her throat at what happened next.

"So, Ron, the Hufflepuff game is coming in two weeks. Worried much?" Dean had asked when the four roommates had made their way out from the Great Hall.

Ron simply snorted in mockery. "Worried? Should I be? The Hufflepuffs are wimps, nothing but a piece of cake," he said proudly.

"Ah, so you're must be more worried about Ravenclaw, then?"

"Please! Are you serious? We eat Ravenclaw with ketchup!" Ron answered. "The Cup is ours. I have nothing to worry about."

"But they did beat Slytherin," Seamus pointed out. Neville sniggered at that and Seamus smiled widely.

Ron lowered his head before replying. "Anyone beats Slytherin."

"Our team didn't," Neville said matter-of-factly.

Ron blushed scarlet, whether that was from embarrassment or from anger, neither of them knew. "Yeah, well... That was supposed to be our victory. Snape must have said something to Dumbledore to pick his house."

"Okay, forget that," Seamus tried to lighten the mood. "Ravenclaw got a new Seeker, remember? What are you going to do about him?"

"He's a temp, he's playing until Cho Chang is out of the hospital wing," Ron explained.

Dean shook his head. "That's not what I heard. Chang's out for good."

Ron stopped abruptly in place and looked back at Dean as though he just told him the most mortifying story ever. "What?" he asked quietly. "Who told you?"

"Never mind who told me," Dean quickly replied. "What are you going to do about that Hastings bloke? He's way too good –"

"Ginny's better," Ron said firmly. "I trust her."

They walked into the entrance hall and meant to cross it to go outside for awhile. It was a cool morning and the weather finally settled down for the moment.

"Oh, you do, do you?" Seamus said with an amused tone. "And do you trust her frenching random guys in the castle's hallways?"

Before Ron could even register what his friend just told him, Seamus let out a loud whistle. The rest of the three of them stopped at the sound and Ron span around to see what was happening. "What?" he whispered in disbelief.

There, in the middle of the corridor, stood a close couple, embraced in a heated kiss. No doubt the identity of the girl was Ginny, his own sister. Her long red hair could be spotted from miles away. Ron could feel his eyes sting at the sight. She stood there, carefree and willingly snogging some bloke, whose face was hidden behind her ginger head.

When the couple heard Seamus call at Ginny, they both broke apart quickly and looked around wildly like two deer caught in the headlights. Ginny's face was evidently red from anger, while the boy who had kissed her was red from embarrassment. When Ron saw who that guy was, a large lump in his throat quickly formed and it ached so much he wanted to start screaming, but surprisingly enough he didn't.

"Holy Merlin! That's Potter!" Seamus called out loud once again, a wide grin plastered to his face. He nudged Dean at the ribs with his elbow. Dean simply stared at the scene with cold indifference in his eyes and turned to walk away. Neville was a little pink in the ears as well. He lowered his head and went to follow Dean outside. "Your sister frenching Potter, Weasley!" Seamus went on. "Now you're defiantly going to lose the cup, and to Slytherin, no less!"

Ron merely stood frozen in place and stared at their faces. Ginny's face quickly changed from anger to something more on the line of guilt and the rosy blush that colored her cheeks quickly spread all over her neck and ears.

Harry felt uncomfortable under his gaze. He knew that any moment now, he would suffer the great outcome of a really awful hex. He realized he was still holding one hand around Ginny's waist and he quickly drew it back and rubbed the back of his neck.

Neither he nor Ginny knew what to say. They had only agreed to tell him about them a minute ago. They hadn't prepared what to say exactly.

Preparing himself to receive the worst hex or punch he had ever got, Harry swallowed thickly and closed his eyes shut. Suddenly, he felt Ginny's hand sneak into his and their fingers entwined together bravely. He opened his eyes and looked down at her, but she was not looking back, she was staring directly at her brother across the room, as if silently challenging him to do or say something.

What Ron did next was a great shock to all of them. He pinched his nose with his fingers and shut his eyes, then shook his head silently in disbelief and went out of the double doors to the grounds, with Seamus still taunting him from behind.

"Well," Harry said slowly once they were gone and after it all sank in. "That must be good. He didn't kill me..."

But Ginny thought differently. She shook her head slowly as the horrible feeling of disappointment tightened around her heart. "No," she said quietly and she dared not to look at his eyes as hers were

brimming with tears. "Ron's not saying anything is not good. It's not good at all."

Ron was so furious he wanted to kick something. He thought that the cool, fresh air would do him some good and make him relax a bit, but instead Seamus couldn't stop blabbing about what they saw that he had to go back to the common room and talk to Hermione.

"Flubberworm," he shot the password at the Fat Lady before she even asked and once the portrait swung open, he climbed inside and strode angrily to the couch in front of the fire. The couch, however, was already occupied by a quite enthusiastic snogging pair. He folded his arms across his chest and stared at them for a moment and cleared his throat loudly until they broke apart. "Do you mind?" he asked hotly, and the young couple quickly stood and disappeared, leaving the large couch only to the House prefect to mull things over. He didn't care that other students around the room began to stare.

He stared at the fire for what seemed like hours, until he felt a familiar and gentle touch around his neck as his girlfriend's hands snuck around him from behind. She kissed his cheek and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Is everything all right? You look angr –"

"I am," he said at once, his voice rough.

Hermione frowned slightly at the tone of his voice and drew her hands away from him. He felt her pull back and he sighed, quickly reaching for her again. He didn't want to take this out on her; it wasn't her fault that his sister was such a fool. "I'm sorry," he said quietly to her. "I didn't mean to take this out on you."

She rounded the couch and sat next to him. She looked him in the eyes and quickly asked, "What happened?"

"It's Ginny," he said shortly. "Did you know she has a new boyfriend?"

"Ah," Hermione said. She knew this would be a long talk, so she changed her position on the couch into a more comfortable one, tucking her legs under her and reaching out to take his hand in hers. "Well, yes, in fact I did."

Ron's head spun to look at her. "And you didn't think that I might need to know about it?" he asked angrily.

Hermione simply shrugged. "First of all, it just happened, so I really didn't have the time to register it myself. Secondly, it's her life; she should be the one to tell you if she wants to. It's not my job to tell you who she dates."

"Hermione, I just made a complete fool out of myself in front of everyone! How could you not tell me something like that?"

"Ron, I think you're taking this a bit too hard..."

"Too hard?' 'Too hard?'" Ron called. "I had to see her snogging him in the hallways; I nearly puked!"

"So what? It's not the first time you saw her kissing someone," Hermione said. "Besides, I think they look good together. They're cute." She smiled fondly, and that only made Ron feel angrier.

"Cute?'" Ron's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "Hermione, I don't think we're talking about the same guy here. I'm talking about –"

"Harry Potter," she finished for him, nodding. "I know."

Ron pushed himself from the couch and turned to face her, his face redder than ever, he threw his arms out and started shouting.

"You knew that my sister is going out with my worst enemy and yet you didn't say a word! How could you do this to me, Hermione? You know how I feel about that guy! I could've prevented this from happening!"

Hermione huffed exasperatedly and tried all her might not to yell back at him. "Ron, you're not listening to me," she said patiently. "It just happened! I found out last night –"

"And since last night you've met me in breakfast, you had plenty of time –"

"It's not my secret to tell!" she repeated, her voice now rising to match his. "And what do you mean you could have prevented this? How can you take you sister's happiness away? That's really cruel, Ron!"

At the start of their raised voices, a quick rush of feet and murmurs were heard, as the people in the room fled away, clearing the common room in no time and giving the two of them more privacy. However, the wizards and witches in the framed portraits hanged on the walls stayed to see the quarrel and started chatting excitedly among themselves as their eyes darted between Ron to Hermione.

"She promised she would stay away from him, Hermione, and now she broke that promise –"

"Do you even listen to yourself?" Hermione asked, slightly mortified by his words. "She's happy, Ron! And if she's happy with Harry, then you should be happy for her! Besides, how can you be the one to talk; you promised her you'd stay out of her love life!"

"We're not talking about me here, Hermione!" At that, Hermione rolled her eyes. "How can you defend him like that? What about all the times when he called you 'Mudblood'? When he used to make our lives miserable? Is that all forgotten, you're telling me, just like that?" Ron asked, incredulously.

Hermione sighed and looked into his eyes, now almost black with anger instead of their normal cool blue color. "Yes, because I found it in me to forgive him, just like you should do. He's changed. He's a better person now and he's sorry."

"And how exactly would you know that?" Ron challenged.

"Because he told me!" Hermione burst out, exasperated.

Ron looked ay her for a moment, confused, trying to understand what she was telling him. "Since when do you talk to him?"

She never took her gaze off him; she wanted him to know she was serious, and that she's not sorry for that. "About the time that I found

out that he likes Ginny. We started talking and I realized that he's actually a good guy, that he's different now. It's because of Ginny that he's different, he really cares for her. I saw that and I promised him I would help him get together with her."

There was a long, uncomfortable pause between them. Ron looked confused and shocked; opening and closing his mouth while searching what he wanted to say, until he finally settled for, "You – did – WHAT?"

Hermione got up from the couch to match his level. "I couldn't tell you because I knew you will take it badly. Ginny's my friend, she deserves to be happy with someone who cares for her."

Ron's hands flew around his head and he looked like he was about to explode. Hermione gulped, wishing the outcome would not be as bad as she imagined it to be. "But why him, Hermione? From all the guys who wish to date my sister, you had to go and help that slimy git! What, he had enough fooling around with all the girls in Slytherin, so he had to go and pick my sister next, as what, to get back at me for something? Or is he that lousy at asking girls out that he needed your help with that? And to think you had to go do it behind my back? To hide this from me, because I would 'take it badly?'"

"You're taking it badly right now!" Hermione called, pointing to him. "I did it for him as a favor and he did it for himself, not because he wanted to get back at you for something! You had nothing to do with it!"

Ron lowered his head and looked at his feet quietly. He walked slowly to the couch and slumped back down on it, staring blankly at the roaring flames in the grate. She sighed again and sat down next to him, wishing he would look up at her.

"Ron..." she said gently.

He didn't say a word to her for a few, long minutes, and she knew he was trying to gather his thoughts. She knew she should give him time to register everything.

Finally, he spoke up in a hoarse voice, which surprised Hermione. When she looked at his face, she could see his eyes were brimming with tears and she gasp silently. She had never seen him cry before. "You... You betrayed me."

Hermione's eyes went wide at his words and her throat ached from her own choked tears. "No, Ron..." she whispered, reaching for his hand, but he pushed it away.

"I can't believe you did this. You went behind my back, you helped the guy I hate the most in the world to get together with my sister, and you're saying I have nothing to do with it? What's left, Hermione?"

Her lips quivered. "What... what do you mean?"

He turned his head slowly at her. His eyes ached by looking at her. "I don't think I can be with someone that does things against me, someone that lies to me."

All the painted witches from the portraits let out a great sad "Aww!", dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs while the wizards simply shook their heads.

"Ron, don't!" she whimpered, knowing the ending of this conversation, and silently pleading she was wrong.

"Go, Hermione."

She grabbed him by the forearm; her grip was so strong and clingy, but not as painful as the ache in his heart. "Ron, please don't do this! I'm sorry! I promise I would never –"

"Hermione!" he yelled suddenly, cutting her off. He turned his gaze back to fire, releasing her grasp from him with his other hand and moving to the far end of the couch. "You did this, not me. And don't tell me you're sorry, because we both know you're not. I had enough with your lies."

"Ron, you don't mean it!" she sobbed, the tears are rolling freely on her face now. "You're being irrational. Please, just take as long as you need and relax, just please don't do this to us!"

"I mean it," he said strictly. "Go away, Hermione. I don't want to see you or hear another one of your lies!"

She stood up shakily and sobbed quietly, her face red and her eyes wet and swollen. She half-ran to the door to the girls' dormitories, but stopped on the first step. "And what about your promise to me, Ron? You promised you would always love me! So don't tell me I'm the only one who lied! It's not okay for Ginny to break her promises, but for you it is? She's right, you know! You are such a hypocrite!" And with that, she disappeared up the stairs.

Ron simply sat on the couch limply and did nothing but to stare into space, wiping the tears from his face with the back of his hand when they escaped his eyes and ignoring the comments the witches in the portraits had yelled at him.

Harry and Ginny walked together, swinging their joined hands back and forth as they paced quietly.

Ginny couldn't believe that one person could hold inside them so many different emotions at once. She felt content and happy and at the same time depressed and guilty. She was happy that she had Harry now, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she let Ron down.

This was not how it was supposed to go. They had agreed that she would tell Ron some time later today about them, and that Harry would act all gentlemanly and ask for his permission to date her. Ron would eventually have to agree, or else she would Bat-Bogey hex him.

"I'll walk you to your common room. You find him and talk," Harry suggested, bringing her out of her thoughts.

Ginny then smiled crookedly. "But I can't let you find out where my common room is," she said rather playfully.

He smirked as well. "Oh, you mean behind the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor?" When she looked surprised at him, he chuckled lightly. "Don't look so shocked, everyone knows where it is."

They walked together in a comfortable silence, simply enjoying being with each other. Harry had wrapped his hand around her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. She couldn't believe that only a few moments ago she accused him for avoiding her and being embarrassed of being seen with her. She was glad she was wrong.

She could get used to this, she thought to herself. She could stay together with him like this, wrapped inside his arms securely for eternity. She wished she could have him alone for an hour or so, somewhere private where no one could interrupt them to kiss, or talk, or kiss...

She smiled at the thought and she lightly touched with her fingers on the back of his hand he had wrapped around her. She knew that there was still time and that maybe right now wouldn't be the right moment to mention it, but she couldn't wait any longer to tell him about Hogsmeade.

Anxious to finally let it out, she started, "Say, Harry..." she said softly.

"Hmm?"

"I don't know if you noticed, but there was a sign for another Hogs –"

"Oh, no," he said suddenly, cutting on her words. "Let's not go down this way..."

Ginny stopped in place, looking at him bewilderedly. "I'm sorry?" Had Harry knew what she was about to say? Did he not want to take her out to Hogsmeade? He said he wanted to go out with her, so what was more perfect than going together to the village for their first date? Well, of course, there weren't many choices of locations to choose from if you're stuck inside a castle for ten months, so that was pretty much the only thing she could look forward to.

Then Harry motioned with his head to the direction they were heading. She slowly looked that way and saw Malfoy walking towards them with Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Do you know any shortcuts?" Harry asked rather coldly, his eyes focused on the group of four Slytherins ahead of them.

Ginny felt relief when she realized what he meant. He only wanted to change their path. "Er, yeah. Let's go this way," she said, leading him through a narrow hallway to their left. "It's a bit longer, though."

"That's okay, I just didn't want to face him," Harry said dejectedly. He sighed and forced on a smile. "Besides, that way I get to spend more time with you." His tone of voice was now more cheery, but yet it was unnaturally cheery, as Ginny could tell.

Ginny looked up at him. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

He nodded firmly. "I'm sure, because if I do talk about it, I'll get upset and you'll get depressed, and right now I don't want either of us to feel that way."

"Okay," she said rather sweetly, rubbing her fingers soothingly on the back of his hand. "But if you do want to talk about it, I'm here."

Harry chuckled and looked down at her. "You're cute." He leaned down and brushed his lips on hers slowly, the taste and texture of her kiss were making him feel slightly giddy and it was just what he needed to cure him for this recent dejection that had fallen upon him because of Draco. She was the air that he was breathing, the solution to his problems; she was what made it all worth fighting for.

"Am I?" she asked when they broke apart, currently amused.

He nodded slightly. "You are."

They reached the Fat Lady portrait a few minutes later, and they parted with another long kiss, which made the Fat Lady call at them angrily to take it somewhere else.

Once Harry left, Ginny said the password and climbed through the portrait hall and into the common room. Her eyes immediately found her brother. He was the only one there after all, and she found him seating on the couch in front of the fire, his head buried in his hands. She sighed, guessing that seeing her and Harry kiss was kind of hard on him. She walked over warily, dreading some sort of an unexpected reaction from him that will startle her. When he did not even bother to look at her, she sat down next to him, waiting for him to acknowledge her presence at least. "Ron..." she said weakly.

After a silent pause, he finally said something. "You promised me, Ginny," he said, his voice muffled through his hands. He raised his head and she was stricken to see his eyes were red and a bit swollen. He was crying, she quickly realized. She couldn't remember the last time she saw him cry was. Ron had always been tougher than her. She didn't know he would take this so hard. "You promised it would be anyone, just not him!"

"That's not what I promised, Ron," she said. "I promised I wouldn't date him if he was a Death Eater, which he's not, and you promised you would accept who I date."

Ron chuckled softly, shaking his head in disbelief. "I knew you'd get out of this somehow... You just couldn't have stayed away from him, could you?"

Ginny looked him deep in the eyes. "Guess not. It was bound to happen sometime, anyway. I planned on telling you about him later, you know." When she noticed he was barely listening to her, she grabbed his face and made him look at her. "Ron, things are different now than they were since the start of first term. He's not who you think he is. He loves me –"

Ron chuckled again, only this time his laugh sounded rather harshly. "HA! The hell he does! Do you really believe that pathetic, cheating bastard? Do I really have to remind you what you went through so far because of him, Ginny? Have you already forgotten how he treated you? How cruel he used to be towards us?"

"That's right! He used to be! And how can you say even that? Can't you just be happy for me? He'd changed and became a new person, a good person, and you can't ever see it or hear a word about it!" she added once he started shaking his head dismissively. "If I forgave him, why can't you? I'm happy when I'm with him! Why is that that you are allowed to be happy with whom you love and the same thing can't happen for me?"

Ron bowed his head and suddenly looked mournfully at the floor. "You know what I feel right now?" he asked and she did not answer, for she knew he had not searched a reply. "I'm just..." his voice trailed off. He swallowed hard and looked up at her, his voice dropped to almost a whisper now, "...disappointed in you," he finished.

The words had pierced Ginny's heart like an arrow, and for a minute, her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't believe her own brother had just told her that he was disappointed in her. Just when she thought that things had gotten bad, it had only got worse when he went on. "But you know, because I promised I would not interfere in your love life, I'll keep my mouth shut, but that doesn't mean I'm accepting it, because I don't think I will ever be able to. Unlike you, Ginny, I stand by my promises."

He stood up from the couch and paced slowly around the room. Ginny couldn't even raise her head to look at him; his earlier words too fresh and hurtful to make her want to see him. She focused on her nails instead while she sensed him rounding the couch. "One more thing, Ginny," he said. She started, but still did not turn to look at him. "If this is your final decision, then say it now."

She swallowed thickly. "It is," she said boldly, her voice a little throaty.

"Then don't come crying to me when he hurts you. Whatever involves him, I want nothing to do with it. I just hope he won't have a bad influence on you and change you completely. One day you see that I was right about him."

Ginny let out some sort of a sigh mixed with a sob. For a moment, she just wanted him to go, to stop saying all those things, to stop making her feel bad about it all. She had to remind herself that she

was doing nothing wrong and that she should have expected Ron's reaction to be like this. She guessed she hadn't prepared herself enough for this.

"Oh, and if you want some consult, you can go to Hermione. After all, she's the one who set this all up."

Then, there was nothing but silence left. Ginny wiped her face with the back of her hand, sniffed the last remnants of her tears and went up to look for Hermione.

When she entered the sixth years' girls dormitory, she found Hermione's bed curtains closed. She walked over and picked inside, finding Hermione crying as well.

"Hermione..." she said quietly as she opened the curtains fully and sat on the bed. The other girl looked up at her with swollen red eyes. "What is it?" she asked gently.

Hermione sobbed quietly and tried to talk between hiccups. "Ron... and I... I... b...bro...broke... up!"

Ginny's heart swelled with sorrow for her friend and with rage for her loss of a brother. What was with him today? she thought angrily. "Why? What has he done?"

"No...nothing," Hermione said while trying to calm down. Ginny knew she hated to be seen like this. "It was my fault."

Then Hermione started pouring out everything before Ginny even asked her to. And Ginny listened carefully to everything her friend had said, of how she became friends with Harry, how she figured out the note was his and how she suggested she would help him, that it was her idea from the very beginning, and finally how she told him what to do and how to act.

"And then today Ron came by and told me he saw you with Harry," she said. Ginny looked at her intently, but Hermione never looked back at her while she told her story. "And I couldn't hide it from him

anymore, so I told him, and he totally lost it. He said I betrayed him and that he can't be with someone that lies to him."

"That git!" Ginny hissed. "I can't believe he did this to you! You should have hexed him!"

Hermione shook her head. "He was right. It's my fault."

"No, it's not, Hermione!" Ginny insisted.

Hermione then looked up at her after a long time. Her eyes were still a little red, but not swollen anymore. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. Please don't hate me. I did it for you. All I wanted for you is to be happy."

"I could never hate you," Ginny said quietly with a smile. "Don't be sorry for anything because I am happy."

Hermione sniffed. "You are?"

Ginny smile widened and she reached for her friend's hand and started drawing soothing circles with her thumb. "Thanks to you I am. Hermione, without you, this whole thing with Harry might never have happened. I should thank you. And Ron's an idiot for not realizing what he had. You'll see that eventually he'll see what he lost and he'll come round. You two are made for each other."

"I'm not so sure about that anymore. He said some really hurtful things to me that I don't think I can ever forget."

"Like I already said, he's a git. Besides, I kind of think he was hurt, too. For not good reason at all, mind you, but still, you both have some things to talk about. Heck, he just made me feel completely guilty about myself that I want to go there and hang him by his tie, but I won't do that because he's my brother and I could get detention for it," Ginny finished half-amusedly and the two girls chuckled.

"Yes," Hermione sighed. "I guess we all have things to talk about..."

One evening, later that week, Harry knocked softly on Lupin's office door. The professor had approached him that day at lunch and asked

him to come since he has some matters he wished to discuss with him.

"Come in," Lupin's husky voice answered. Harry pushed the wooden door open and walked inside the small office, finding Lupin sitting at his desk, checking students' essays. He raised his head and smiled slightly when he saw Harry there. He pushed himself from his chair and flicked his wand at the mess on his desk. A second later all the parchments and books were rearranged and stacked in a neat pile.

"Hey, Remus," Harry greeted and went to sit down in one of the dusty, patched armchairs that Lupin held in the room. A clutter of class came from behind as Harry waited for Lupin to join him. A little curious as to what took him so long, Harry turned to peek around his shoulder and saw Remus crouching down and picking out something from a lower cabinet behind his desk. "Feeling any better?" Harry tried to engage a small talk between them, to break the silence, referring to the latest full moon.

"Oh, much better, thank you." Remus finally came to join Harry and settled on the round coffee table two goblets and a bottle of mead. As he started pouring down the golden liquor, he noticed the look of surprise on Harry's face and gave him a slight grin. "Don't tell your mother I let you drink this. Got it for Christmas from Dumbledore and it'd be a waste to drink it alone."

Harry nodded and held a crooked smile on his lips. Lupin finally sat down in the other chair, leaned forward over the table and handed Harry a goblet full of the liquor. Harry took it, thanking him. He wondered what it tasted like. He never drank any other alcoholic beverage beside Butterbeer (which didn't even count as alcoholic, anyway) before, and he and Lupin both knew well that his mum would have a fit if she found out he had some. He took a sniff at the content of the goblet and sensed the sweet smell of honey. Pressing the goblet to his lips, he took a small sip of the drink, expecting some sort of a sugary taste, but instead finding his throat burning slightly, the taste of honey was barely noticeable. He coughed lightly and Lupin chuckled at the scene. "All right there?" he asked amusedly, taking a swig off his own goblet.

"Yeah," Harry said, clearing his throat. Putting down his goblet on the table, he leaned back in his chair. "So, you said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

"I do," Lupin confirmed, and his light mood had changed into a more somber one. "It's more like something your parents asked me to talk to you about."

Harry remained silent, waiting for Lupin to continue. He didn't want to guess what this was about. His mind often took him to the wrong places, so he listened carefully.

"Remember at Christmas when there was a Death Eaters attack at Malfoy Manor? Well, back then the Aurors thought that they'd captured every escaped Death Eater, but apparently they were mistaken."

Harry frowned. "There are still Death Eaters out there?"

Lupin nodded. "I'm afraid so. There had been a sighting of the Dark Mark last night, just out west of London, close to Surrey. No one has been reported missing or hurt, but the Ministry and the Order are still searching for who had conjured it."

"So you don't know who it was or how many were they?"

"Unfortunately no. Yet, the Aurors are still working on how they have missed someone in their files. Every person held in Azkaban has a record, of course, but so far, no one had been found missing. The Ministry thinks it was an inside job. The files must be accurate at all times, you see."

Harry contemplated this. "How come there wasn't anything in the Prophet?"

Lupin sighed. "The Minister thought it would be best to keep this quiet for now, seeing there was no real harm done, so there isn't a reason to frighten the entire Wizarding population that they might be in danger."

"But they can warn them to be more careful!" Harry protested angrily. "People should be aware! Luckily, this time no one got hurt, but next time could be different!"

"And the Aurors hope that there won't be a next time. They're hoping to catch whoever is still missing soon," Lupin explain rather calmly. This peaceful manner of his professor had made Harry feel furious. While there could be people out there missing, hurt or dying, everyone seemed calm about this, like they have everything under control when they clearly didn't.

"So why are you telling me this, if the Ministry wants to keep this quiet?" Harry asked.

Lupin was quiet for a moment, contemplating his words carefully. "Because it seems to concern your family, Harry. You're still the target. The Death Eaters are looking for your parents and Sirius. Don't worry; they have gone into a safer place, protected by a Fidelius Charm. The Death Eaters don't know where they are. Our speculation for the last night's events is that whoever they were, they were looking for your parents, probably searching at Surrey, maybe for your mother's sister's house. They must have thought they were hiding with them. Aurors have been sent there to protect them, as well."

Harry gazed into space, taking a moment to think about this. He pushed his bangs irritably from his forehead. When will this ever end? he thought to himself. He looked up at Lupin again. "Do you know where they are?" he finally asked.

Lupin shook his head. "No. Only the Secret Keeper does."

"And who is this Secret Keeper?"

Lupin gave half a shrug and another shake of the head. "I don't know, Harry."

"So, what about me? Won't the Death Eaters be looking for me as well? Shouldn't I go into hiding with them?"

"You don't have to. You're very heavily protected here at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore's watch. As long as you stay in the castle, you're safe." After a moment when Harry seemed to ponder all this, Lupin went on, "Do you know what this also means, Harry?"

Harry knew fairly well, but it was such a small issue, that it almost didn't matter at all. "No Hogsmeade weekends." He had meant to go with Ginny, only the matter hadn't come up yet and he forgot to mention it to her. He guessed that now he shouldn't even bother with it, since he wouldn't be able to go, anyway.

"I'm sorry," Lupin said sincerely. "But your parents and Dumbledore fear that if you go into Hogsmeade, the Death Eaters will track you down. There are a lot of dark wizards staying in that town; every one of them can be linked to a Death Eater. We can't risk that. You understand?"

Harry nodded. "I do, but what about all the other students? If there are alerts of another Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade, won't it be better to cancel it for everyone's safety and not just my own?"

"Dumbledore has his reasons. Don't worry, though, the town will still be guarded by Aurors."

"But this is stupid!" Harry exclaimed. "And there's nothing you could do to make Dumbledore change his mind?"

Lupin shook his head quietly. "You should know, Harry, that Dumbledore is always prepared for the worst; he would never endanger his students." Harry didn't know what else to say to this. He had no other choice but to agree to this plan, and of course, Lupin had made him swear that he would not say anything about it to anyone else, either.

He left his professor's office with a heavy feeling in his chest that he could not shake off. On the following morning, as the day of the Hogsmeade trip came closer, he felt even worse.

Everyone around him was buzzing with excitement about the weekend, making plans on where to go and what to do. He wished he

could say or do something, even if not directly, but anything to make this trip get cancelled. He didn't want anyone's harm to be his fault just because he didn't warn them.

He was sitting alone, yet again, at the Slytherin table over breakfast. His plate of food remained untouched and had already gotten cold. He never noticed Ginny approaching him from her own House table, until he was startled to feel her warm hands sneak around him.

"A Knut for your thoughts," she said playfully, leaning down to whisper softly in his ear.

"Hi," was his reply. He touched her hands and turned his face to kiss her cheek.

"You looked miles away. What were you thinking about?" she asked.

Harry hesitated. "Um... you?" he said tentatively.

She smiled brightly and the sight of her beaming like that had already made his day better. "I hope only good things..." She leaned over his shoulder and met his lips in a quick kiss. He was then surprised when she slapped lightly on his shoulder. "Now, what were you really thinking?"

Harry looked at her, simply amazed with her wisdom. She should have been sorted into Ravenclaw, just for that, the thought absently crossed his mind. He couldn't believe how well she already got to know him over the mere few days they had been together.

She looked at him intensely, waiting for his reply and he sighed. The promise he had made for Lupin never left his mind, but still, he knew he had to tell her something. "I was actually thinking about this Hogsmeade trip that's coming up next weekend," he finally said, and wondered how he can go on from here without revealing too much to her. He hated the fact that they had to start their relationship with him lying to her already.

"Oh, really?" she said rather excitedly. "I was actually going to talk to you about it, as well!"

Harry blinked. "You were?" he asked, confused.

"Yeah, you know, I was thinking we should meet in the entrance hall and we start from Honeydukes, then we head down to – What's that look on your face?" she suddenly asked, all the excitement she had had suddenly vanished.

Harry was more than surprised, to say the least. She had already made plans, he thought. He didn't know where he could bury himself. He was going to ruin it for her, and she would be crushed. He had to break it to her gently...

"Look, Ginny," he started, taking her hands in his and guiding her to a vacant chair next to him. She looked around with slight concern in her eyes, as if not sure how his Housemates, or even her Housemates, would react to a Gryffindor sitting at the Slytherin House table. Luckily, it appeared to be that nobody even looked their way, so she seemed more relaxed and more focused on him.

"Is something the matter? I hope I'm not dropping this out on you just like that. You did ask me out, after all, remember? You even chased me around the school so I would agree. I mean, I know you hadn't said anything, but that's okay, because I –"

"Ginny," he said again, more firmly this time. That had got her attention. "I didn't say anything because I wasn't planning on going."

She didn't say anything for what it seemed like a whole two, very slow and awkward minutes. The deadly silence between them was fiercer to his ears than if she would have started screaming at him. She didn't even blink; she simply stared at him, wide-eyed and her mouth agape.

"Say something, please? So I know that you're okay," he said, his eyebrows close to each other with confusion at her reaction.

She closed her eyes briefly, pressing the heels of her palms to them and then she started shaking. For a moment, he was sure she had started to cry, and he had no idea what he can do to comfort her, he

wasn't good at this stuff. The only idea he had in mind was to get as far away from her as he could, before she would pull out her wand and hex him.

Only then, she emitted one of her soft chuckles and she looked up, her eyes completely dry. The look on his face must have been pure bewilderment, for she started laughing a bit harder when she saw it.

"What's so funny? Why are you laughing?" he asked, his eyes checking her closely. She looked as if she was under some sort of a cheering charm.

"I... Wha... I... I don't know what to say... You're pulling my leg here, aren't you?" she asked, her voice light and expectant.

"No, Ginny, I'm not." He looked at her closely, his eyes willing her to understand.

She stilled again and started opening and closing her mouth several times. "But... I don't... What's the point in asking me out if you're not going to take me out?"

Harry gulped thickly. Her voice had gotten stronger and angrier. He couldn't help but wonder why Weasleys had such hot temper. Is it something to do with the hair? he asked himself.

"I'm sorry, but it's not like I planned it –"

"Oh, you hadn't planned it, then? It just... came up!" she said hotly.

Harry sighed, wiping his now sweating forehead. "I really wish you would let me explain."

"But what's there to explain, Harry? You obviously already made up your mind, or else you wouldn't have said you aren't going! You asked me out on a date and now when we can go out on that date, you're ditching me!"

"I'm not ditching you!" Harry said defensively. "I just... I can't go."

Ginny's eyes suddenly narrowed dangerously. "You can't go or you don't want to go?"

Harry bowed his head down and looked at his lap as he said the next words, afraid looking her in the eyes while he said them. "A little bit of both, actually."

Ginny huffed angrily. "Argh! I can not believe you, Harry Potter!" she said, and for Harry's taste, rather loudly. He hoped no one was watching them. The last thing that he wanted was to be the center of attention right now, and he wished they could have taken this somewhere more private, if he only knew it will get to this...

Harry looked up at her guiltily.

"I guess this is my fault," she went on. "I shouldn't have just assumed things. I should have waited for you to do it yourself. I expected too much."

Harry tried to reach out for her hands, but she shoved him away rather cruelly. "Listen, Gin," he said softly. "We can stay in the castle. Think about it, we'll have much more privacy when everyone's out –"

"When everyone is out in Hogsmeade having fun, you mean," she said, her voice slightly cracking now. "No, it's okay, I get it. You don't want to be seen with me, you don't want to go out with me; you never did –"

"It's not like that, Ginny! For the last week, the whole school had seen us together probably tens of times already, so don't think that I don't want to be seen with you. I do want to go out with you, but not to Hogsmeade."

"Will a broom cupboard take your fancy, then? Or perhaps the Forbidden Forest?" she snapped. "I don't know, maybe you find dark creatures to be really romantic? Or maybe your definition of "romantic" is different from the way I, and other normal people for that matter, see it." She bowed her head, shut her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, obviously fighting back tears. Finally, she took a

large intake of breath and looked up at him again. "If you don't want to go out with me then just say so, I'm a big girl, I can handle it."

"I already told you that I do want to. Please don't take this so hard, it matters to me too, you matter me."

"If I matter to you, then why haven't you spoken to my brother yet, like I asked you to? Don't you care that it's important to me? You do realize that the only reason that I'm not talking to him is because of you. I chose you, Harry. My brother isn't speaking to me because I'm dating you. Then again, if we aren't dating, then this whole fight between us is completely pointless."

Harry's eyes widened and he suddenly felt his heart shrink at her words. "No, don't say that. I'm sorry, I've been preoccupied and I forgot –"

"Because you don't care!" Ginny retorted angrily.

"I do care!"

She went quiet again, no doubt gathering her thoughts and trying not to let all her steam out. "Fine," she said shortly and she stood up abruptly from her chair. Harry's eyes followed her. She looked up ahead, refusing to meet his gaze. "If you think that I'm going to sit back in the castle while all my friends are going to have fun, then you are very much mistaken. If you don't want to talk to my brother, then don't, and if you don't want to go to Hogsmeade, then stay in. I, on the other hand, am going, with or without you, Harry Potter. If you do care, like you say you do, then come and find me." With that, she strode out of the Great Hall.

"Ginny, come on!" Harry called after her, but she didn't turn back. She nearly bumped into Blaise on her way out, as he came to the Slytherin table. He stopped abruptly to look after her angry figure walking away, and after she was finally gone, he came to sit next to Harry in the chair she had just vacated.

Harry sat back in his chair and stared blankly into his space, picking up his fork and spinning it absently on the wooden surface of the

table. Merlin, he wished this was all just a bad dream that he will soon wake up from. He even tried to pinch himself, just to make sure; it hurt like hell, so he swore under his breath.

"Broken up already?" Blaise suddenly asked as he reached for a scone and started buttering it.

Harry turned his face and shot him a deadly glare. "No!" he said firmly. "We just had a fight," he clarified.

Blaise started laughing at that. "Already? What did you do?"

"Shut up, you're not helping," Harry snapped. He eyed Blaise suspiciously at the grin on his friend's face. "You would like that, won't you? See us breaking up?"

"Me? No. Nott, on the other hand, is already raising bets on how long it will take you to split. And I know that, not because I'm in on it, but because I saw him in the common room yesterday, collecting money from people."

"Great..." Harry muttered darkly, shoving his untouched plate away and tossing his fork on it.

"Yeah, I just think that one week of relationship is pretty poor, even for you."

"Right," Harry said slowly. "And you're the one to talk. The longest relationship you ever had lasted three days."

Blaise's smile disappeared and he let out a long whistle. "Point taken."

"Thought so," Harry smirked. "What are you doing here, anyway? Where's What's-his-face?"

"Who, Draco? He's off to do some of his own self-pitying."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Really? What's wrong with him now?"

Blaise shrugged. "Dunno. Family stuff as usual, I guess. I didn't bother asking. He wouldn't have told me anyways, as you know..."

"Unfortunately I do."

Blaise took a large bite off his scone and with a mouthful, he said, "Oh, so you know, about that Hogsmeade weekend..."

Harry suddenly let out a whiney moan and banged his head against the table. "Don't. Remind. Me," he said each word with a hit.

"Ooh," Blaise said excitedly. "So that's what got your girlfriend's knickers tied in a knot!"

Harry slowly raised his head from the table and looked at Blaise with heavy-lidded eyes. "If you speak of my girlfriend's knickers one more time – you're dead!" he said warningly.

"Yeah, so anyway," Blaise said quickly, as if not taking Harry seriously. "I asked Pansy to go with me."

"You did as I said?" Harry questioned, getting more interested with the new subject.

"I did. Wrote her a letter and even sent her a rose."

"Where did you get –" Harry started to ask.

"Greenhouses," Blaise simply replied and Harry nodded, quite impressed.

"And how did it go?"

"Well, she turned me down," Blaise said half-heartedly.

"Oh," Harry said stupidly.

Blaise waved him off. "She said that I'm not decisive and when I'll make up my mind, I let her know."

"Sorry, mate. Girls can be like that."

"That's okay. I decided I'm going to do exactly what you did. I'm not going to give up."

"That's good. You should do that," Harry agreed, clapping on Blaise's back.

Blaise got up from his seat and adjusted his book back strap on his shoulder. Harry looked up to find the Great Hall nearly empty by now, since everyone had gotten up for the first class of the day.

"Yeah. I mean, it worked for you, how hard can it be, right?"

"Exactly," Harry said, also getting up. Then something clicked. "Wait... what?"

Blaise simply laughed. He was already a few feet ahead of Harry, as they started to leave the Great Hall. "Oh, by the way, they're blue."

"What's blue?" Harry asked, not following.

"Your girlfriend's knickers," he replied amusedly.

Harry's face had quickly reddened up. "YOU'RE DEAD!" he yelled as Blaise broke into a run, laughing just like Peeves, and Harry chased him all the way to class.

Later that day, just before lunch, Blaise had to stop at the infirmary and asked Madam Pomfrey to fix his twisted arm.

A/N: Okay, so that's it for this chapter. I really, really planned to go on, but that's for the next one, I'm afraid, because then it would be way too long.

Anyways, there's more to come: more fluffy scenes and more angsty stuff. So I hope you liked this chapter. If you did, please let me know what you think. ;)

Chapter 18 – Until Death Do Us Part:

Part 1

Tap-tap... tap-tap... tap-tap...

The continual pitter-patter noise on the surface of the heavy wooden table was getting on Blaise's nerves. He felt the beginning of a migraine forming in the back of his head and each new tap was boring a bigger hole. It would have been less irritating if he wasn't trying to do some last minute revisions to the Arithmancy test he had just after lunch. Trying to ignore it, he sighed and turned a page in his book and looked at the question, but no matter how many times he tried to read the same sentence, nothing sank in.

Tap-tap... tap-tap...

The words started to disappear from the page and he blinked rapidly in order to focus on the text, but to no avail. It seemed that Harry, who was sitting across from him, his one hand drumming on the table distractedly while the other was angrily flipping through an open book he set down on the table, and had his eyes staring like a hawk at something far behind Blaise's head.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap...

Blaise's eyes snapped at Harry's drumming fingers and narrowed when they tapped the table again, in a quicker rhythm now.

The vein in his forehead throbbed with his quickening pulse. His eyes now red and watching as each tap had turned to a thud in slow motion. Blaise cracked a knuckle before he smoothly pulled out his wand from the inner pocket in his robes and with a non-verbal spell, he aimed it at the disturbing fingers and they immediately petrified like stone and stopped in mid-tap.

Harry, quickly snapping from his daze, as he was suddenly aware of the new feeling in his hand, looked down to see his fingers frozen and unable to move. As shock spread across his face, Blaise sighed

again and muttered, "Thank Merlin," under his breath and returned to his book.

"Oi!" Harry exclaimed, knocking with his stone-like fingers on the cover of Blaise's book, which unbeknownst to him, had only irritated Blaise further. "What'd you do that for?"

Blaise turned his head to see what Harry had been staring at, knowing already he would see Ginny Weasley at her own house table. He turned back to Harry and pointed his finger at him. "I've had enough of you acting like this. For three days now, all you do is stare at her and sulk and now it's driving me nuts. You need to talk to her."

Harry's eyes looked over Blaise's shoulder again, finding Ginny talking to none other than Dean Thomas. He huffed angrily and looked back at his friend. "I tried, just earlier. She shot me this deadly glare. I seriously thought she was going to hurt me." He shrugged. "I fled."

Blaise sniggered down at his book and shook his head. "So now you're basically back where you started."

It was Harry's turn to point his finger at Blaise. "No, I'm not! I just need to figure out a way to make her talk to me again."

"Just take her on the bloody date. That would make her talk to you again," Blaise said as he dipped his quill in his inkpot and scribbled the answer to the question on his book, watching with satisfaction as a green check mark had formed next to it.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. "You make it sound so easy..."

"How much longer are you going to ignore him?" Ginny did not bother to answer. Hermione nudged her in the ribs. Quite hard, actually. Hard enough to make her yelp. "Look at him!" she hissed.

Rubbing the sore spot, Ginny glared at her instead. "You did not have to do that!" she rebuked. "I know he's there; I know he's watching me. I'm trying to make him understand that he's a complete brainless...duck!" she said the last word that came to her mind.

"But he's trying to talk to you and you won't even let him come near you!" Hermione countered. "You're lucky he's still looking at you. If he was another guy, someone like your idiot of a brother, let's say, than he wouldn't even think twice to even try and make up with you."

Ginny knew Hermione was right. She was grateful that Harry still wanted her, even though she was a total bitch to him for the past few days, but still, she could not shake off the disappointing feeling he left her with.

"You know he's sorry," Hermione went on. "Did you even think of why he can't go with you? Maybe he got a detention that he isn't proud of and he doesn't want to tell you about, huh? Did you think of that?"

"No..." Ginny muttered, started to think that maybe she was wrong after all. She wanted to talk to him, and she was trying to make him jealous just so he would walk over to her and say 'Fine, you win!' That's all she wanted to hear, really. It would be proof that she was his all along and that he did want her, even in Hogsmeade dates. "Did he say anything to you?"

"He asked when you are going to forgive him," Hermione replied.

Ginny frowned angrily. "Well, you can tell him —"

"I'm not telling him anything, Ginny," Hermione cut her off. "I did my part. Now, you messed it up, so you need to fix it."

Ginny was sure she was steaming by now. "I did not mess it up! He did!"

Hermione raised her hands in defeat before she collected the books she had spread on the table before her into her bag. "Fix it, Ginny. Talk to him."

She stood up and looked away just when Ron and his mates passed by. Ron stopped and leaned over Ginny's shoulder, grabbing a biscuit off the table.

"Practice today at four, Ginny. Don't be late," he said nonchalantly before he left the Great Hall with his friends.

Ginny looked up at Hermione and noted the sad look in her eyes. While Ron had casually said a word or two to Ginny, which usually was only about two things: their family or Quidditch, he hadn't even once spoken or looked at Hermione since the big row they had last week. And Ginny felt sorry for her dear friend because she knew how much she still cared for her brother.

"Okay," Hermione said in a breathy voice, obviously holding herself from bursting into tears again. "I'm leaving or I'll be late."

"You still have ten minutes left," Ginny said, checking her watch.

"I know, but I want to go early so I could get a good seat. You know, not too far in the back and not too close to the window. It's all karma, really."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Whatever." Hermione didn't seem to take notice it. "Well, anyway, good luck on the test."

"Thank you," she said with a forced smile. She turned to leave, just when she noticed Harry approaching the Gryffindor table again. She turned back to face Ginny again and mouthed 'Talk to him!' before she greeted him with a polite 'Hello' and left for her Arithmancy class.

When Ginny looked up and saw Harry coming close, she quickly grabbed her book bag, took another quick sip from her drink and meant to leave before he caught up with her.

"Ginny, wait," he called after her.

"Sorry, Harry, I can't right now. I'm really late for class," she shouted over her shoulder, rushing for the door.

"You've still got some time left. Please."

"Yeah, but you know how it is, I need to get my karma seat before someone else takes it," she excused rather lamely.

"Please," he said again, his voice was now whispering in her ear and his hand grasped her forearm, and she stopped at once, missing the touch of him. "Just hear me out."

"Fine," she breathed with her eyes closed. She opened them when she felt his warm breath on her face and looked up to find his brilliant green eyes staring at her. "But I don't want to be late –"

"I'll be quick," he said. He gulped nervously, making his Adam's apple bob up and down noticeably in his throat. "I'm sorry, okay? I just can't have you be mad at me. I mean, we barely started being a couple and we're already fighting. I can't take it anymore. I... I miss you," he ended rather shyly.

Ginny felt her heart swelling at his words, as simple and corny as they were. She hated and loved at the same time the way he could make her feel just by saying something as simple as that. "Oh, Harry..." she said softly and moved closer to wrap her hands around his neck. He smiled and his hands automatically sneaked to the small of her back, holding her close. "I'm sorry about the way I acted. We can forget this ever happened and you'll see that you won't regret anything. I knew you'd take it back. This weekend is going to be –"

She never finished her sentence. Harry had moved back and took her hands off his neck, looking her in the eyes. Even without him saying anything, she knew quite well what his eyes were telling her.

She gaped at him. "Oh, you are unbelievable," she said, her voice full of silent anger. She pulled away from him, snatching her hands from his grip with fury. She wanted so badly to slap him that moment, but she held back.

"I'm sorry," he tried.

"Again with that 'sorry,'" she snapped. "Are you really? Or is it something you just say every time you want to shut me up?"

Harry rolled his eyes at that. "You know that's not true. I do mean it."

She looked at him skeptically. "I really doubt that." She spun on her heel and went up a flight of stairs to her next class.

"So you're not going to forgive me, then?" Harry shouted after her.

She stopped on a step, and looked down at him with narrowed eyes. "Oh, I'll forgive you," she said with some anger to her tone, "when pigs fly!" she spat and disappeared around a corner.

The bell rang and Harry was glad that he had a free period. He ran a hand through his hair, making it even messier than usual. With nothing to do, he went to the Slytherin common room, trying to think of a way to make Ginny talk to him again...

Ginny was running through the castle's hallways, shouting at people to clear her way. She took several shortcuts, but she was still going to be late. Ron would never let it go now. He told her not to be late, and here she was, almost eight minutes past four, still running towards the entrance hall.

Once outside on the Hogwarts grounds, she hopped on her broom and flew as fast as she could to the pitch. As she got closer, she looked at the sky and noticed six players already in the air. She cursed under her breath, leaning forward to gain speed on her broom and hoped she would fit into the practice unnoticed by Ron and try to spot the Snitch before he saw something was off.

Unfortunately, all hopes quickly left her when a high pitched whistle cut through the air and all six players stopped playing at once. The only other player with red hair turned to look at Ginny, who had just managed to get into the pitch area.

Ron looked up at his team and blew his whistle again. "Keep it going, guys," he called to them, and while they continued their practice, Ron turned back and looked at Ginny. She was sure he was going to scream at her and demand to know why she was late. She was already preparing a speech about how she was held back in class, but she didn't need to say anything, as Ron only looked at her for a minute or so, not saying a word. He drew from his pocket a little

golden ball and let it go. The tiny Snitch zoomed as quickly as a flash from his hand, and Ginny lost track of it as it disappeared into the air.

Ron, still not saying anything, gestured with his head to where the Snitch disappeared. Ginny nodded stiffly and as he flew back to the goal posts, she mounted her broom higher and went searching for it.

Two exhausting hours later, Ron called the practice. They all headed to the changing rooms to freshen up.

"Ginny," Ron called and she stopped in place. Her heart raced a little faster than usual and she was sure it was nothing to do with the adrenalin from the practice. She knew he would bring her lateness up, it was inevitable. She sighed heavily, better get it over with now, she thought bitterly and prepared herself for some yelling. They stopped in the middle of the pitch, coated in orange sunset and cool winter breeze, while the rest of the team went to the changing room.

"Look, Ron, I'm sorry I was late. Professor Binns kept pouring us notes and you know how he is sometimes..."

He held up a hand and she went silent at once. "I just wanted to say good job on practice today. Keep it up and we won't lose the Cup."

She stammered out incoherent syllables, and then merely gaped at him. She definitely didn't expect him to say that. Ron had surprised her twice already today. "Oh," was the only word she finally managed to say. "Erm, I mean, thank you."

He nodded once. "Yeah, but don't let it get to your head. The next time you late, I won't be as soft as I was with you today. It'd be ten laps 'round the pitch for every minute that you missed."

Ginny nodded with agreement. "Fair enough."

A moment of awkward silence passed between them. Ron ran a hand through his hair and Ginny sighed and searched something to focus her eyes on, anything, just not on him. Finally, he spoke. "Right... Well, I'd better get a shower and head back to the castle. Snape loaded us with work."

"Right," Ginny said. "I think I go get cleaned up as well."

They walked silently to the changing rooms, shoulder to shoulder, but still not sharing a word, or a glance at each other.

On Saturday morning, Harry found himself taking a flight on his broom outside, watching longingly as a crowd of overenthusiastic students gathered in the entrance hall, while Filch and McGonagall sorted through them, checking that everyone had permission to go down to Hogsmeade.

It was a nice day for a Hogsmeade trip, he noted. It wasn't too cold and snow had fallen over night and covered the ground and trees with thick layer of white that was a real lovely sight to the eyes.

Harry sighed at the sight of the chattering and laughing students below and a ting of jealousy pierced his heart. The whole week passed by without him talking to Ginny. As much as he tried to explain to her the best he could as to why he couldn't go with her, she refused to forgive him. He was feeling rather frustrated now. He knew she would be going alone, or with her friends, and he was glad, because he didn't want to ruin it for her, but at the same time, he wished she would stay in and spend the day with him, instead.

The week they had shared was wonderful and Harry still couldn't believe it actually happened, but he now knew that it was too good to last. Nothing ever seemed to be working out for him. The last few days without her talking to him, made him think over their so-called relationship. He thought about it a lot and realized that maybe it was best if they just ended things now, before it became too awkward to do it later. They weren't speaking anyway, so why stall it? He only wanted her to be happy, anyway. And if she wasn't happy with him, then he would step back and grant her the happiness that she deserved.

Harry sighed again, this time more in desperation than in jealousy, and lowered his broom to the ground, too tired of watching other people able to go, all about to have fun just because he wouldn't be there.

Ginny looked at her figure in the mirror and tried to straighten her woolen hat. It was a Christmas gift from her mother. She had decided that it would be nice to make something different other than the usual Weasley jumpers, so she made all her children woolen hats this year. Ginny thought it was a rather nice change. She had so many jumpers with the letter G on them that she kept most of them back at home because she wouldn't wear all of them at school. She just hated the silly pompon at the top; she thought it was pretty childish.

Just when she thought she had set it perfect, a loose strand of her long bangs fell over her eyes. She blew at it in irritation and when it wouldn't move aside, she tucked it behind her ear and combed her fingers through her long, silky hair, trying to get a few knots undone.

"You look lovely, dear," the mirror said softly.

Ginny stopped fixing her hair and smiled in satisfaction. "Thank you," she told the mirror kindly. She turned to Hermione, who was sitting on her bed, a book on her lap, like always. "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

Hermione did not look up but only shook her head, turning a page in her book. "I already told you that I've got so many things to do –"

"But we'll have so much fun together, Hermione," Ginny tried to convince her friend again as she came to sit next to her on the bed. "Come on, don't make me go alone. People will start to whisper things and point at me." She faked a pout when Hermione looked up and chuckled at the face her redhead friend pulled.

"Sorry, Ginny. Why don't you just go with Luna?"

"I would, but she said she needs to search for her shoes. And they only other pair she had was flip-flops and she can't wear those, not because it's about seven degrees outside, but 'because it doesn't fit her outfit,'" Ginny shook her head, repeating the words Luna had told her about an hour ago. She sighed and pushed herself off the bed and made her way to the door. "Fine, I'll go alone. Maybe I'll run into Neville or someone."

"Are you sure it's all right that you're going without Harry?" Hermione asked, closing her book and moving off the bed. She walked with Ginny down to the common room.

Ginny shrugged. "He doesn't want to go, that's his problem. I'm tired of trying to convince him to go with me."

"But you could have done things differently. You know how bad he feels for not being able to go. Maybe you should stay and keep him company?" Hermione suggested.

"That's what he wanted, too, but I'm not going to stay behind when I can go out. I'm so tired of being stuck inside the castle," Ginny explained. "Besides, he didn't tell me why he couldn't go; he just said that he couldn't. I feel like he's already lying to me."

"Maybe there's something that he doesn't know how to tell you?" Hermione suggested.

"He knows he can tell me anything, Hermione. I told him I would be there for him whenever he needs me."

They stood in front of the portrait hall. Ginny glanced around the room, noticing only first and second years were occupying the common room. She furrowed a brow. "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

Hermione reached her hands out and hugged her friend. "Go out, have fun and don't forget to bring me some sweets."

"Well, I'm not sure that you deserve them for making me go alone," Ginny said teasingly. "But you did get me a boyfriend, even if he is the biggest git in the world – well, okay, that earned you a bag from Honeydukes."

Hermione grinned and clapped her hands excitedly. "Thank you! You're the best!"

Ginny chuckled. "I know I am."

She climbed out the portrait hall and went down to the entrance hall. Once she got there, she stood and waited with all the rest of the crowd.

"Ginny?" someone called.

She turned around and noticed Ron shoving his way through people in order to get to her.

"Oh, hey, Ron," she greeted sheepishly. She noticed he wore his new Weasley hat, as well. She secretly giggled when she noticed the color: maroon, like he always got. "Going to Hogsmeade as well?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I couldn't stand another day of studying."

"I know what you mean," she said. "Don't know how Hermione manages it..."

Ginny saw Ron squeeze his eyes shut and she winced once she realized her blurt. "Sorry."

Ron shook his head. "Nah, that's fine. Hey, where is...you know?"

"Oh, he's not coming," Ginny said quietly, too embarrassed to talk about this subject with him. She wasn't sure anyway why he brought it up or even why he was talking to her in the first place. Wasn't he supposed to be angry with her?

Ron eyed her questioningly and when she caught his look, she smiled. "Don't get your hopes up, everything's fine. At least, I think so..." she added the last sentence under her breath.

They moved up in line, and finally when they reached the front doors, where Filch and McGonagall stood, checking a long list of names. "Weasley, Ronald and Weasley, Ginevra," she said, checking the list. "All right, you can go."

Ginny caught sight of Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat. She was lying comfortably in her owner's arms, eyeing them both maliciously with her yellow eyes. She hissed at her angrily, but Ginny ignored her.

Filch patted his cat and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Don't worry, my sweet, we'll get them later."

Walking down to the school gates, Ginny turned to look at her brother. He was looking at his feet while he walked, his hand shoved into his pockets. "Why are you walking with me?" she asked him out of curiosity. He looked up at her and she saw his pink cheeks and she narrowed her eyes. "You aren't here to spy on me or anything, are you? To try and keep me away from Harry?"

"Of course not," he objected. "I saw you were alone and thought of keeping you company. If I'm bothering you that much —"

"No, I don't mind," Ginny said, shrugging. "It's just that one minute you are a prat and you won't talk to me for the stupidest reason ever —"

"Is not!" he complained.

"Is too," she countered and fought a smirk when she was suddenly reminded of childish talks when they were kids. "And the next, you're all sunshine and rainbows again and you're walking with me to Hogsmeade like nothing happened."

Ron's ears turned red and he refused to look at his sister's face. He kicked a pebble in the road and watched roll down the lane. She knew he was too shy to apologize to her. It took a great deal of his pride, too.

"Oh, I get it," Ginny suddenly said. Ron could not avoid the amusement in her voice. He looked up at her and saw her smirking.

"What?" he asked, his eyes round.

She chuckled. "You are a prat, Ron."

He frowned at her. "What did I do now?"

Ginny chuckled again and eyed him closely. "You had no one to go with and you didn't want to go alone, did you?"

"That's bull—"

"Do not finish that sentence! If Mum was here, she would have kicked your arse back up to Hogwarts and make you study for NEWTs through all the rest of the Hogsmeade weekends."

"You're no better," he grumbled in a low voice.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Anyway," she said the word slowly, getting back to their previous conversation. "I know for a fact that Dean and Seamus are with Parvati and Lavender, because those two wouldn't shut up about it all through today's breakfast and I just saw Neville walking with some Hufflepuff in your year. You're all alone. You planned to go with Hermione, but you mucked that up, so that makes you a prat."

He was quiet for a moment, as though letting everything slowly sink in. Then he said in a quiet voice, "You're horrible."

Ginny couldn't help but laugh. Soon, he joined her and they chuckled all the way down to the village.

Ginny loved coming down to Hogsmeade. Even when it was the same each time, she still enjoyed it every time she was here. She had so many things she wanted to do today: go to Honeydukes, visit Zonko's, have a Butterbeer in The Three Broomsticks and if she still have some time left, maybe see the Shrieking Shack one more time.

She was glad that she wasn't alone anymore and that she had Ron with her. Even when he could be an absolute idiot now and then, he was a great brother the rest of the time.

"Hey, what's going on there?" Ron asked. Ginny looked where he pointed and saw a rather large gathering of people around what looked like a small shop.

"Don't know. Let's go check," she suggested.

As they walked over, they noticed Padma and Parvati Patil sorting people to enter the shop. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny noticed Dean leaning against a distant wall, looking really bored and annoyed. Lavender and Seamus stood by him, embraced together rather sickeningly to Ginny's taste, and Seamus smirked at something that Lavender had whispered in his ear.

"Madame Asha," Ron read from a large wooden sign that hung above the door. "Seer and Fortune Teller."

Ginny looked up at the sign. "Oh, that must be Parvati's aunt's new place that she talked about!" she admired. She grabbed Ron's wrist and pulled him. "Come on, let's see up close."

"You can't be serious," Ron mumbled and made the slightest of protest sounds before he caved in as curiosity took over him and let his sister drag him along.

It must have been the bright, red hair that caught Parvati's eyes. She beamed brilliantly at their sight and pushed her body through the noisy crowd to greet them.

Ron eyed the crowd of shoving, loud girls warily. "You girls are mental. I don't see what the big deal is," he commented. "It's not like some celebrity had walked in there; it's just a seer, probably a fraud, too."

"Don't include me in this," Ginny hissed at him as they watched Parvati get closer. She tried to fake a smile at her friend's way. "I haven't got excited over anything yet."

"Yet," Ron mumbled. Ginny nudged his side with her elbow just when Parvati finally met with them.

"Ron! Ginny! I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed, beaming excitedly.

"This looks fantastic, Parvati," Ginny nodded, suddenly sounding like one of the crowd-girls, which made Ron quirk an eyebrow.

Parvati's head then snapped back at the crowd as a sudden cry came from within the shop. A second later, a girl with brown auburn hair emerged out of the mass of people, holding a picture of a boy tightly to her chest. Her girlfriends quickly gathered around her in a circle and she flushed red as a tomato before she cried out, "She said we will be getting married!" No surprise was when her friends all let out an equal squeal of joy and started jumping together in a group hug.

Ginny noticed Ron was about to gag at the sight and poked him with her elbow again. Luckily, Parvati didn't seem to notice his reaction, she merely grinned at the sight of the squealing girls.

"So, things are going well for your aunt, I see," Ginny observed.

Parvati nodded. "Yeah, it's been great." There was a small pause before Parvati spoke again. "Do you want to come in? I can get you in next," she said, her eyes hopeful.

"Er –" Ginny said and looked to see Ron's surprised, yet fearful, eyes. Ginny felt uncomfortable on Ron's behalf. She knew he wouldn't like it after seeing what it was all about and she felt bad for making him wait for her. Besides, by what she saw so far, it really looked like it would be a waste of her money.

"Come on!" Parvati said, not really waiting for her answer. She grabbed Ginny's hand and pushed her towards the crowd. Without even thinking, Ginny took hold of Ron's hand again and dragged him with her again.

Ginny grinned mischievously at her big brother, who protested incessantly and tried to keep his foot locked in place, unsuccessfully, of course. "Come on, Ron! Don't be shy!" Ginny teased. "I'll let you go in first."

"Ginny, don't you dare!" he called, alarmed, trying to free his hand from hers.

Parvati whipped around. "Oh, that's great!" she said when she caught on Ginny's words. She turned to her sister who stood at the door to the shop and gestured with her head at the two Weasleys. Padma nodded and let them in easily, while fighting off the crowd of protesting girls.

Parvati walked Ginny and Ron inside the small lobby inside. Ginny was surprised the shouts and loud noise of the street outside weren't heard inside and knew there was a silencing spell on the door, probably to keep the meeting more private and intimate, she guessed.

Ginny would have to admit the atmosphere inside was really relaxing. The room was much different from Trelawney's classroom, yet similar at the same time. There was soft Indian music playing from somewhere in the room, but Ginny could not place from where exactly. A pleasant scent of jasmine was floating in the air, coming from burning incense that sat on a very low table in the center of the room. Around that said table were arranged in a U-shape, oblong, decorated pillows for people to sit on.

Aside from her and Ron, the room was empty. Ginny started to wonder where Parvati suddenly disappeared to. She noticed Ron was looking carefully at the room more in query than in wonder, like she just had. He had his hands wrapped around himself, taking in the pictures of what looked like a Hindu Goddess who had six arms and was sitting in meditating position.

A feeble jingle of bells was heard from behind and Parvati had returned, now carrying a tray with two golden, bejeweled cups.

"Aunt Asha will be with you in a moment," she said with a smile. She placed the tray on the low table in the center of the room and Ginny could see the cups were filled with some steamy, cinnamon-color beverage. "Have some Chai tea, while you wait."

Ginny smiled politely and thanked her. She looked across the room at her brother, who still seemed quite reluctant and eyed him warningly. "This place is really something," Ginny said, taking one goblet and sipping at the foreign drink. She suppressed the urge to cough at the

mix of flavors. It was spicy and sweet at the same time. She honestly preferred drinking English tea; this was too much for her taste.

"It's really... spiritual," Ron added from the corner of the room, now examining a golden statue of an idol. Ginny saw Parvati turned to look at him and placed her cup of Chai back onto the tray.

There was a rustle from behind a bamboo screen, which was decorated with pink flowers and vine, and another girl, which was in Ginny's year, emerged outside with a satisfied smile plastered to her face. Parvati hurried over to her side.

"Everything went well?" Parvati asked the girl.

The Hufflepuff nodded sheepishly. "Yes, everything's wonderful." She pulled out a small leather pouch. "How much do I owe you?" she said while rummaging inside it.

"Three Galleons and five Sickles," Parvati said. Ginny noticed Ron's eyes as wide as saucers and he quickly made his way to her from across the room while the Hufflepuff girl handed Parvati her money and left the shop.

"Three Galleons and five Sickles?" Ron hissed in Ginny's ear, completely scandalized. "I don't want to spend that much on some loony!"

"Ron, you can go in now," Parvati called pleasantly, waiting next to the bamboo screen. Ron shot Ginny a deadly glare and Ginny merely pushed him forward, smiling teasingly at him. 'I'll get you for that,' he mouthed just before he disappeared behind the screen and Ginny let out a bark of a laugh when he was gone.

It didn't happen very often when Hermione got bored, especially from a book, but today was an exception and she found herself skimming through one that, she was positive that, on any other day, would be excellent reading material, without any interest in it at all.

She was sure it would pass when she would stop thinking about things that bothered her, like the whole 'Ron-is-a-prat' issue, but it had been days now and she couldn't stop her mind from wandering.

She glanced around the deserted library as she sat in one of the tables with a gigantic stack of books next to her, that she had no interest whatsoever to open right now, and sighed dejectedly. She never acknowledged how enormous the library actually was, until now, when no one was around. Even Madam Pince, who usually kept her hawk eyes on each burrowed book in the room, wasn't at her station.

She hated feeling like this; alone, sad and hurt; and she regretted her decision to skip on the Hogsmeade trip.

"I suppose I could go and meet Ginny there," she muttered to herself.

And without even giving it a second thought, she pounced from her chair and ran out of the library, forgetting for the first time ever, to return all the books she had taken out back to their respective shelves.

She quickly made her way to the entrance hall, choosing a few shortcuts she and Ron had found throughout the years and skipped through two stairways. She took a corner, only one level to her destination, when she suddenly collided with something and nearly fell backwards. She was sure the corridor was empty and that she might have just taken the corner too quickly and simply got dizzy, but a blink of an eye later, someone had materialized before her and held her shoulders steady.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized to the person, as she tried to regain her footing.

"That's okay, Hermione," he said with slight amusement. Hermione looked up at his familiar voice and into his eyes, emerald green, appearing behind narrow square-shaped spectacles.

"Harry," she said, relieved to see someone familiar. It's not that she had forgotten that he stayed behind in the castle, as well, but she

wasn't sure if he will be up to spending his time with her, so she hadn't thought of going to find him. "Hello."

He smirked down at her, still holding her shoulders, just to make sure she wouldn't trip. "Hurrying somewhere?"

She shook her head. "Just thought I'd head down to the village."

"Oh," he said quietly, releasing her and taking back a step to put some space between them. "Well, have fun," he wished with fake sincerity in his tone.

She watched him as he bent down to pick up something from the floor and tucked it inside his robe's pocket. She couldn't see what that thing was, but it was protruding out of his pocket. He then walked down the corridor with heavy footsteps, to where she had just come from. She thought he looked depressed, just like every day for the past week since Ginny wouldn't talk to him. She sympathized with him, knowing he was lonely and hurt just like she was.

She turned around and run over to keep up with him. His eyes glimpsed at her inquiringly when she came by his side.

"What are you up to?" she asked innocently.

"What do you mean?" he asked, unsure.

She gulped and cleared her throat, as though she needed to emphasize she needed to rephrase her question.

"I know you're not going to Hogsmeade, so I wondered how you were going to spend your day."

He didn't reply, but merely kept walking on, and she stayed by his side. She wasn't sure where he was heading, but she was sure that neither did he.

"I mean, I wasn't planning on actually going myself, up until a few minutes ago, but I can stay, with you, if that's okay."

There was an obvious pause as he seemed to consider her offer. She noticed a faint smile graced the corners of his lips. "I'd like that," he told her.

A comfortable silence passed between them as they strolled around the castle, nowhere particular in mind. Hermione liked it that way. She looked up at him secretly every few minutes and smiled to herself. It still amazed her how he had changed in such short time. If she had walked around in the same corridor as him only four months ago, she wouldn't be surprised if he would have insulted her in one way or another. Now she admired how he had matured, only because a single emotion – Love.

After what looked like a good ten minutes of silence had passed, the thought of what he had put earlier in his pocket was still on her mind. Curiosity took over and she couldn't stop herself from asking him. "What is that bulging out of your pocket?" she asked quietly.

She was startled, however, when he let out a strong, hearty laugh. She looked up at him, and he gave her a cheeky wink. "Not an average kind of question to ask a bloke now, is it?"

It took Hermione a full minute to realize what he thought she meant and her face turned warm and red. "Don't be rude. That's not what I meant."

He chuckled again. "I know what you meant. That's just my father's cloak."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Do you always carry your cloak in your pocket?"

"No, just this once. I use it when I want to be alone."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand."

"All right," she nodded, accepting his reasons, but not really getting it.

"So, how is Ginny? Is she okay?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"She's still quite upset that you couldn't come with her. She was quite looking forward to go out with you, especially when this should have been your first date and all."

Harry sighed heavily and rubbed the back of his neck. "I know. I really messed up with her, haven't I? I hope I will be able to take her next time. That is, if she won't ditch me by then." He chuckled dryly, no real amusement behind it. He sighed again. "She would probably hold it against me forever. I wish there was some way I could make it up to her."

"But you can, Harry," Hermione said brightly. "She's there; you just need to get to her."

"Hermione, I can't," he said firmly.

She stopped to look at him. "But what is it exactly that you can't, Harry? You can't leave the castle or you can't be in Hogsmeade?"

"I can't be in Hogsmeade without leaving the castle, and I can't leave the castle without being seen," he said, trying to keep his patience with her.

She seemed to ponder this for a minute, then suddenly she looked up and Harry noticed an unusual shine in her eyes. "Yes you can, Harry!" she said excitedly. Then all of the sudden, she grabbed onto his wrist and broke into a run, pulling him with her all the way to the third floor, to a corridor which seemed to be deserted but for a single statue of a one-eyed witch.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" he asked, short-breathed.

She waved her hands at him in a wild gesture that he should stop talking and listen to her, while she caught onto her breath herself. "Harry, trust me. It's possible to leave the castle without being seen. Ron told me he and his brothers used to do it all the time. You just have to be sneaky, and I know that you Slytherins are nothing but sneaky."

Harry smirked at her words. He couldn't deny to that.

"There's a secret passageway over here," she said, walking over to the ugly statue of the one-eyed witch. Harry watched, transfixed, as she pulled out her wand, muttered something under her breath that he couldn't catch, and tapped it once on the witch's hump. The stone hump slowly slid open and revealed a narrow and dark gap. "It will lead you straight to Honeydukes. Try to be as unnoticeable as you can."

Harry looked at her, completely astonished. Then a mischievous smile slowly traced his face. "Hermione," he said lightly, walking to stand by her, "if I'm going, then you're coming with me."

Hermione did not respond, however. She stood still, not saying a word, her eyes slowly widening. Harry wanted to ask what was wrong but was stopped when she clumped her hand to his mouth before he could say anything. He was too busy to fight her off and nearly bit her in the process, but then he heard it himself, the distant murmur of someone approaching. The timing couldn't be any worse, he thought to himself and he stopped struggling with her. The voice grew louder and then another joined the first as the people whom they belonged to drew nearer. A second later, Harry noticed Remus and Professor Dumbledore quickly coming their way from around a corner down the hallway.

Without giving it much thought, Harry pulled out his father's cloak out of his pocket. He ignored the urge to laugh out loud by the look that Hermione had on her face when she realized that he was holding a real Invisibility Cloak in his hands. Without saying anything, he threw the cloak over them both and made them disappear, as though they were never there.

Together, they clumsily struggled through the gap in the statue, desperately trying to cover up the bottom so their feet wouldn't be seen. Then they slid inside and heard the hump of the witch slid close behind them.

As Remus and Dumbledore passed by, Remus stopped near the still statue. He was sure he saw something switch in it. Being one of the Marauders, of course he knew all about the secret passages in the castle. He walked closer to it and examined it more carefully. The stone was still as in any other statue. He listened carefully, trying to hear something, maybe some voices from within the tunnel, but there was complete silence. The only thing he did notice was a torn net of spider webs that must have been stretched from the witch's hump to the back wall. He knew for sure the passage was in use after the Marauders' time, especially when their map had been passed through several students of the school, but it didn't mean that it was in use in this very moment. Those spider webs could have been torn for days, if not weeks.

"Coming, Remus?" Dumbledore asked, waiting patiently for him a few feet away.

Remus looked up at the old Headmaster's face and shook his head to himself. "Yeah," he said and went to join him.

Still a little suspicious, he walked with Dumbledore to the Headmaster's office, but made a note to himself to check more into it later when he'll be back in his own office.

"Damn, that fall was hard," Harry muttered when he rubbed the sore place where he landed on his bum. He helped Hermione get up from the floor.

"Thanks," she whispered, dusting off her robes. "But you didn't need to push me, you know."

"Sorry," Harry said, only his head now visible, floating in mid-air as he wrapped the cloak around his body.

"And I don't see why you needed me to come this way. I could have just met you there."

"I thought you wanted to keep me company? Anyway, where to?"

Hermione's hands closed around her wand once again and she lit it. She looked around the narrow hallway and started leading the way, though, now that Harry could see much better, he realized there was only one way they could go.

"That's scary. Stop that," Hermione complained suddenly, eyeing Harry's floating head guardedly. Harry laughed and the sound echoed through the empty space, but he didn't reveal the rest of his body. "Where did you get an Invisibility Cloak anyway? Aren't they supposed to be rare?"

"I told you, I got it from my father. It's an old family heirloom," Harry answered simply. "So yes, I suppose they are rare."

"I thought the ministry had banned them."

"It's a good thing that my father is an Auror, then," he said half-jokingly and she huffed angrily, unsatisfied with his answer.

They walked together quietly for several minutes until they reached a set of stairs carved into the stone. They climbed and climbed, until finally they met a trapdoor in the ceiling. They stopped to listen if there were any voices outside, but all they could hear were their shallow breathings. Very carefully, Hermione reached up and pushed the door open and peeked outside. Harry stood still besides her, waiting for her to make the first move.

"I think it's safe," she whispered. She pushed herself up until her whole body was over the opening and she was peering down at him from what looked like a cellar. Harry quickly followed her and hoisted himself up. Hermione closed the trapdoor as he stood up and quickly rejoined him. He threw the cloak around them both once again and together they looked around the small room until they found a door.

"Please don't let it be locked," Hermione silently pleaded as Harry tried the brass knob.

"Are you a witch or not?" he questioned with a raised eyebrow. He saw her thinking about it for a second, until it finally dawned on her

and she pouted. He chuckled silently and switched the doorknob and pushed. "In any case, it's open."

They walked into the sweets shop very close together, invisible to anyone else, and tried to push themselves outside through the thick crowd of customers.

When they were finally outside, Harry felt the warmth of the store replaced with the cold air and the smell of fresh snow entered his nose.

"Where do you think she is?" Harry asked Hermione, looking around the street for Ginny. There were too many people there; it would have to be impossible to find her. The only hope he had was the bright red hair to give her away.

"I don't know," Hermione said, her eyes fixed on the faces of passersby. "I didn't see her inside Honeydukes. We'll have to start looking. I need her to see me," she added.

"Right," Harry said. He led her behind a group of trees, where she would be able to come out from under the robe without people seeing her appear out of thin air. "Be careful when you talk to me," he said in a low and amused tone while they came back onto the street. "You don't want people thinking you're some crazy person who talks to herself."

Hermione didn't say anything and Harry wasn't sure if she was ignoring him or actually taking his advice. They slowly walked through the crowd and Harry saw the many faces of different Hogwarts students, but as different as they were from each other, they all had one thing in common: they were all looking happy.

They passed a group of chattering girls and Harry turned his head to look at them, observing how gleeful they all were. They shrieked with laughter and a pang of guilt stung in his chest. How could he be so selfish? How could he break his promise to Remus and risk everyone?

He gulped when a strange voice entered his head. As long as you're covered, it's safe... No one can see you.

He nodded to the voice, gripping the cloak tightly in his fingers and tightening it around himself so it didn't have a chance of slipping off.

"Harry!" He heard Hermione hiss. "Are you there? Where are you?"

He looked up and saw Hermione standing in the middle of the street, looking around herself frantically in search of him. There was no way she would be able to find him like that. He quickly jogged to her. "I'm here," he whispered.

"Don't go disappear on me now! Stay with me!" she chided and Harry laid a hand on her shoulder so she'll know he understood. "Come on, I think I know where she might be," she said and led the way to where a large crowd of girls stood outside a small store.

Ginny jumped with a start when Ron suddenly burst out from behind the bamboo screen.

"Ron?" she asked with confusion, but he didn't turn to look at her.

"I'll wait for you outside," he spat.

She watched as he thrust the money into Parvati's hand and strode out of the room, muttering something that sounded like "Stupid seers and their obsession with love."

Parvati turned to Ginny with a perplexed expression, but all Ginny could do is shrug. She got up from her seat and followed Parvati behind the bamboo curtain.

"Please go in," she said, holding her hands in a way that motioned her inside the door that stood behind the screen. A smooth curtain of transparent pink fabric hung all the way to the floor from the threshold.

Ginny nodded to her housemate and pushed herself behind it and wrinkled her nose when another strong smell of sweet incense hit her. She looked around the small, dim and round room. It was almost

complete blackness inside but for a few candles that floated around and gave it enough light to see through. She noticed the walls were painted in dark burgundy and had gold ornaments painted on them. With a close inspection she saw they were of stars and planets. She noticed several suns and moons.

Heavy black curtains reached the floor, concealed the windows and the daylight. There was nothing else on the walls besides that. No shelves of books or tea cups or crystal balls.

In the back of the room, exactly in front of the door was a round table that was covered with black velvet. A small bowl, a little deeper than a bowl of soup, but altogether around the same size, held a small blue flame in it.

"Come closer, child," a deep, husky voice said from the back and Ginny felt herself shiver.

She wasn't sure she even wanted to get closer to the table, but it seemed like her legs thought differently. She couldn't control them, they moved with their own will, like some unknown force beckoned them forward. As she got closer, she was struck to see the blue flame lightening darkly the features of a woman's face. Her face looked engraved and smooth, like she was made of stone. Her skin was dark copper and her hair black with silver streaks. Despite all that, she was very beautiful.

"Sit down," her lips, full and sculpted moved with the strange voice that did not suit her stunning face. Ginny found herself suddenly facing the woman, standing behind a chair. She unwillingly complied, slowly sitting down and looked into her eyes, noticing they were coal black. As they were face to face, their eyes locked together, and Ginny found she was transfixed and unable to blink. It didn't hurt or sting, it was like she was hypnotized in some way. She couldn't tear her gaze from the blackness of the other woman's eyes and she felt something stir deep inside her. It wasn't in her head or in her heart or veins, she felt the black gaze wrap around her soul.

"Ginevra," she hissed. Her name sounded to Ginny like it was some strange language on the woman's pointy lips. "The White. So strongly

different from the Red. A pure innocent, yet you evoke so much flare around you."

Ginny let out a small gasp suddenly. She was hearing her, listening carefully, but the vision of her stone-like face in front of her vanished in a second when the words become sights. It wasn't anything she ever experienced before in her life. She was in the same room, still sitting where she was, but colors started to swirl around her like in a tornado; strange, nameless colors, ones she had never seen before. The colors suddenly mingled together into two forms. Ginny could distinctly see her own image in each form, only one was red and the other was white. The two figures of herself that stood across from her vaporized like smoke and abruptly disappeared. Ginny found herself staring again into the black eyes of Madame Asha, still incapable to look away.

"Ah-oh," Hermione said in a small voice. She stopped abruptly in the middle of the crowd and Harry nearly collided into her. He could feel her shoulders tense and tried to understand why she stopped. Screeching girls pushed all around them, trying to get their turn to see the Seer and Harry snarled when he was hit in the head several times. He started to hate the fact that he was invisible, but knew it was for the best.

"What?" he asked with impatience, a little more than desperate to get away from the girly crowd.

Hermione said nothing and stayed frozen in place. Harry followed her gaze until he saw what caused her to stop. Ron Weasley was pushing his way out of the Seer's pavilion. Harry noted he was obviously upset about something. He watched him get away from all the screaming girls, lean against a side wall and sigh. He was looking at the ground with a desperate look.

"Go to him," Harry whispered in Hermione's ear, giving her a little push.

"No... I... I can't," she stammered. "He wouldn't want me there."

"He needs you."

Hermione slowly turned her face to where she knew his must be. Even though she couldn't see him, she was looking right into his eyes. "Walk me over?"

"Sure."

He grabbed her hand and pushed her through the crowd and walked with her towards Ron.

"Hold your hands above the basin," Madame Asha instructed.

Ginny's hands lifted from her lap on their own. Her palms stretched out her slender fingers above the small, blue flame. The forefingers and thumbs touched their equals and a shape of an inverse heart formed in the space between them.

Madame Asha's hands rose up high from the table top, guiding with them the blue flame to grow bigger in the small bowl.

The flame rose from the basin and spread between Ginny's outstretched fingers. They didn't burn, but gave a warm and soothing feeling while they licked and tickled her skin, and through all this time, Ginny kept looking into the woman's eyes.

She held her hands above the flame for another minute. "Turn them over," the Seer said in her low voice.

Ginny did as she was told and for the first time since she took her seat, she felt the need to look away, to see her palms, and when she tried, she found she was able to do as she was pleased. She let out another small gasp when she saw in the glow of blue flames that there were red marks scorched into her skin. The odd scars created a pattern of symbols, similar to ancient runes, which she could not understand.

Madame Asha bent over and took hold of Ginny hands in hers. Her touch was so light, Ginny could barely feel it. She could feel the Seer's long, dark nails scratch her skin, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

They sat silently for a long moment. Madame Asha examined the symbols, reading through them, trying to decipher their meanings.

"You found yourself your one true love," she commented suddenly. Ginny's mind flashed suddenly with an image of Harry before coming back to reality. "I see he cares deeply for you, as much as you for him, but you do not believe. It is important, my fair child, that you never underestimate him. Even true love can break apart.

"The boy who is standing outside and waiting for you, loves you greatly and he will protect you," she said. "But he can also cause you great pain, my child, physically and emotionally." Ginny inhaled deeply, trying to understand what she was being told. She fought the urge to argue, to tell her that this sentence was meaningless, since it was only her brother waiting for her outside and there is no way in the world that he will ever cause her pain, but she was mute, she couldn't open her mouth to speak and it frustrated her.

Without anything else to do, she stayed as still as she was and listened, prepared for another vision to flash before her, only none came. "You will come across a fork in the road today with your love. The path you will take together is meaningful for your future. The choice is up to you, whether you choose the white road or the red one. Go to the white and all will go well until death do you part. Go with the red and it will be as if nothing had ever occurred between you."

As she finished her speech, the flame extinguished and all was left of it was a trail of gray smoke. The symbols on Ginny's palms disappeared as though they never existed and Ginny was able to think more clearly and move freely once more.

"Thank you," was all Ginny could say. She knew she wanted to say more than that, to protest somehow, to ask questions she wasn't sure about. She didn't understand half the things she was told.

"Good luck, Ginevra," Madame Asha said in her deep, mystical voice and nodded once.

Ginny left the room a little shaken. She wasn't sure if she should take this experience seriously. It seemed even beyond serious, but the

words she repeated to herself in her head just didn't make much sense.

She handed Parvati the money she owed for the visit, not paying much attention to the question her friend asked her, and went outside to meet up with Ron.

Ron lifted his gaze when a shadow covered his eyes. He let out another sigh when he saw it was Hermione standing before him. Just like she said, he thought back to the Seer's words. Until she had actually appeared, he wasn't sure if he should trust what the Seer had said to him. Only, here she was, standing before him, looking into his eyes with an expression he could not quite figure out.

"Hello, Ron," she said in a small voice.

"We need to talk," he said and grimaced at the firmness of his own voice. She nodded quickly. "Erm – the Three Broomsticks?" he suggested feebly.

She nodded again, tucking a long curl of her hair behind her ear nervously. He was glad he wasn't the only one of them who wasn't feeling this way. "Sounds good," she said.

Ron pushed himself away from the wall and straightened his body. He couldn't look into her eyes for much longer and had to shift his gaze and look at something else, but from the corner of his eyes, he thought he saw her shift her shoulder in a weird way, like someone just touched her, but it couldn't be, they were alone, just the two of them.

"Oh, wait a second," she suddenly called and he turned to look at her reluctantly, hoping he wouldn't get lost by the beauty of her eyes. "Did you happen to see Ginny? I was looking for her earlier."

"Oh, yeah, she's in there," he pointed back to Madame Asha's place. Then he cursed silently. "I was supposed to wait for her."

"Don't worry," she said quickly. "I'm sure she'll manage on her own. We really need to talk."

"Right..." he said slowly, not quite sure what was up with her. He saw Hermione turn around for a second, before she looked back at him with a little smile on her adoring lips. The odd move made him want to ask her what was wrong, but he let it go. There were more important things to discuss right now.

As Harry took Ron's place and leaned against the wall, still hidden beneath his cloak, he watched him and Hermione head down together to the Three Broomsticks. It was strange, but he couldn't fight off the smile when he was looking at them. He really wished them well. Even when it was Ron Weasley, his long time enemy, the hatred he once felt towards him was now gone. He wasn't sure when exactly it happened. Was it when he made his amends with Hermione or when he finally started seeing Ginny? Even so, his goal right now was to talk to Ginny before he'd try to talk to him and make him accept his feelings for his sister, because if things didn't work out well today between them, there could be a chance that he may not need to talk to him after all.

He lingered about five more minutes, before he noticed the crowd of girls not too far from him, had started screaming and pushing again. A moment later, his eyes caught upon a gleam of red, which he could not mistake. It was her and she was coming close to him, pushing her small frame from the mass of girls, until she was finally free.

She stopped and looked around, surely looking for her brother and couldn't find him. He wasn't sure how he should approach her, but he knew he must do it now, or all be doomed.

He took five quick steps and he was standing behind her. She was still unaware of his presence. He took in a deep breath.

"Ginny," he whispered and was not surprised to see her jump and turn around at the sound of her name. He caught her wrists in his hands and she froze, not sure what was touching her exactly. "It's okay, it's just me," he said in a soothing voice and watched her relax, but only little. She was still a bit cautious.

"Harry?" she whispered, looking down at her wrists where he held her.

"Yeah."

She looked up and he was sure she was trying to look at his eyes, but her own eyes only focus on the blank air around her. "Why can't I see you? What kind a spell is it?"

He lifted one hand and touched her cheek lightly. He watched her lean gently into his touch, feeling the silky texture of the cloak on her skin. She hummed softly and closed her eyes. He shook his head, but realized immediately that she did not see it. "You can't see me because I have an Invisibility cloak on."

"Oh," she said simply, as though having an Invisibility cloak was the most common thing. She opened her eyes and looked up, to where she guessed his eyes must be, but they only reached his nose. "Where's Ron?"

"He had some matters to sort out with Hermione."

She nodded and then looked up again. "You said you couldn't come. You changed your mind?"

"I just didn't want to hurt you anymore," he explained.

"But why can't I see you?" she asked again, pressing on the matter.

"It's complicated," he answered. "I don't want you to get into this, but let's just say that I can't be seen here. I couldn't tell you before, but I also couldn't stand you staying mad at me. We only just dating and here we are, already fighting. That's not how I wanted it to be. And now, it came to a point where I just didn't care anymore, because it was stronger than me."

"I want to see you," she said, her voice only pleading a little.

Even when Harry deep down still remembered the promise he violated, he couldn't deny her request. He wanted her to see him, too. He wanted to be able to walk around freely just like her, to hold her hand and not touch her through an enchanted fabric. He knew he

couldn't do it, he couldn't be seen. But would it really hurt anyone if she was the only one who could see? He asked himself.

"Not here," he said.

She nodded once more, understanding immediately. She closed her fingers around his invisible hand and tugged lightly. "Somewhere more private, then." And he let her lead the way.

"I must say, this is not quite what I pictured for our first date, but it's better than nothing," Ginny said when they walked together side by side. She was still holding his hand, and she was quite sure she saw a few people shooting her strange looks when they caught her talking, apparently, to no one. She giggled at the thought, but couldn't care less, because Harry was with her, finally, even if he was invisible.

"I'm sorry this is not what you expected. I hope to make it up to you next time," he said. "Oh, and to make you see how sorry I am..."

Ginny looked to her left, where she knew he was standing, with a puzzled look when he didn't complete his sentence, and noticed the tip of his wand appear out of thin air. She heard him mutter a spell and saw a jet of yellow light hit a small sparrow that flew up in the sky above them. The sparrow started to swell and its gray-brown feathers turned pink. It grew two triangle ears until they were too long and flipped over. Its beak got flat, rounded up, and became fleshier until it was a snout. Ginny stared at it, completely struck. It was not a sparrow anymore, but a pig with sparrow's wings, and it was flying in circles, squealing and snorting out of surprise. Ginny started to laugh, and caught the attention of a few more people, who also stared at the flying pig and started to point and laugh.

"You're crazy!" she whispered at Harry when she calmed down. She pointed her own wand at the pig and turned it back to a sparrow and watched as it flew away.

She heard him chuckle. "Well, you said you'll talk to me again when pigs would fly. When that didn't happen I had to take some action."

She giggled, squeezing his hand in hers and feeling his do the same.

"So, am I forgiven?" he asked.

"I need to see you before I'll forgive you," she replied and tugged on his hand again, still guiding their way. She wasn't sure where she was taking him, but she needed to find some isolated place where no one will see them.

They walked several more steps until their path was blocked by the fence viewing the Shrieking Shack. She looked to her left and saw in the distance of the snow-patched road, a small group of trees. She turned to her right and noticed a madden path leading to an empty, narrow alley.

Then she froze, and the words Madame Asha had spoken to her merely minutes ago, words she had forgotten, staring to swarm back into her head. You will come across a fork in the road today with your love. The path you will take together is meaningful for your future. The choice is up to you, whether you choose the white road or the red one. Go to the white and all will go well until death do you part. Go with the red and it will be as if nothing had ever occurred between you...

This was it, Ginny thought. This is what she meant, the fork in the road, the red and the white.

The red road was the muddy path on the right, which led to the empty alley. If they choose to go there, it will be like nothing ever occurred between them. Everything will be lost, they will come apart. And if they choose the white road, the snowy trail on the left, all will go well. Until death parts us, Ginny repeated to herself. She suddenly realized the meaning behind the phrase. Marriage. This is the pure future she could ever hope for herself, only she wasn't in a position right now to decide whether she wanted it with Harry. They were on their first date. How was she supposed to know right at this moment if she wanted them to get married?

Then, the rest of the prophecy flooded her mind.

The boy who is standing outside and waiting for you, loves you greatly... he will protect you... It only hit home at that exact moment. Madame Asha had meant Harry all along. He was waiting for her outside, he loves her, and she knew, without any doubt in her heart that he will protect her in time of need. He was her future, her pure white future, but what was with the rest of the prophecy? He can also cause you...—

"Ginny?" Harry asked, cutting Ginny mid-thought.

She looked up to the sound of his voice, searching his invisible face. "Yes?" she asked weakly.

"Are you okay? Do you want to head back?" he asked with concern.

She shook her head. There was only one place where she wanted to go with him right now. She flashed him a smile. "Everything's fine. Let's go here," she said, pulling him with her to the group of trees, where their future together waited. She had to admit it looked more inviting, more romantic than a narrow and filthy alley.

Harry chuckled again, oblivious to her musings. "I wished I would have brought some Butterbeer..."

"Later, maybe," she said, pulling him behind the trees. In a second, Harry's head, covered with a smug smile, had appeared from underneath his cloak, looking around to check they were indeed alone. She did her own checking before; she didn't need him to do it himself. "We're alone," she promised.

"Yeah..." he breathed and his eyes were focused on her lips. She smiled in return and leaned over and touched her lips to his. He sighed into the kiss and took her small frame into his arms, pulling her closer to him. While still kissing him, Ginny took hold of the silky, invisible fabric of the cloak and pulled it off his shoulders and tossed it to the snowy ground, revealing the rest of his body.

"Much better," she said between kisses and Harry nodded, completely focused on kissing her.

"Did you forgive me yet?" he asked cheekily as he drew his lips from hers and started kissing her neck instead.

She was so lost in their moment that she forgot how to speak. Enjoying the hot feeling of his mouth on her neck, she merely nodded in response. She could feel his warm breathe on her skin and a small shiver ran up her spine, sending goosebumps from her shoulders and down to her toes.

They pulled apart after a moment, both panting for air and giddy from the kiss. For a moment Ginny wondered how was it possible there was snow all around them, when she felt so hot all of the sudden.

"I think I'll take that Butterbeer now," she said, still breathing hard. Harry ran his hand through his hair, nodding. "Do you want me to go get the drinks?"

He looked up and she noticed his cheeks were red. She knew she looked just as mess as he did. "Um, no. I'll go. You stay here."

She meant to protest. She thought he said he couldn't be seen. She didn't want to ask questions that he wouldn't be comfortable answering, so she chose not to say anything. She got her answer, however, when she watched him pull the cloak back over himself. "I'll be right back," he whispered before he disappeared once more.

"Don't steal anything!" she called after him and heard him chuckle in response.

Harry wasn't sure how he was supposed to get into the Three Broomsticks without revealing himself, but he didn't want to make Ginny do the job. He wanted to show her he was gentlemanly enough to get his lady her drink, even in his situation.

When he reached the door of the pub, he waited, not quite positive whether it would be a good idea to open it himself. It would look strange if the door will open on its own. So he waited. Fortunately for him, he didn't wait long. A minute later, two old wizards left the pub and Harry hurriedly pushed himself inside before the door got shut again.

Now is the hard part, he thought as he walked over to the busy bar, careful not to bump into someone. He looked around, noticing the patrons that were merrily chatting and shamelessly flirting with an overloaded Madame Rosmerta. Everyone looked busy and oblivious to him. Harry quickly pulled out of his pocket 4 Sickles and called in a fake, rough tone, "Two Butterbeers to go, Rosmerta."

Luckily, no one seemed to look for the voice without a face. Madame Rosmerta, too preoccupied with her other customers, took the money quickly and placed two bottles of the golden beverage without even looking away once from the people who she had a conversation with. Thankful for that, Harry swiftly hidden them under his cloak and turned around to leave.

As he passed the tables on his way out, his eyes focused on the very back of the pub and a smile spread on his lips. There were Ron and Hermione, leaning in for a kiss. Glad that things had worked well for them as well, Harry chuckled silently to himself and made his way to the door.

The noisy chatter around the pub had ceased at once when an ear-splitting scream came from the main street. Every head in the small tavern rose with a start.

The bottles in Harry's hand had slipped away from his grip and shuttered to the floor. No one seemed to notice the small incident, because every eye in the room was seeing the same thing Harry did: the mass of people on the main street, running and screaming in fright and in the skies was reflecting a great, green skull with a snake protruding from its mouth.

"Death Eaters!" someone yelled and the silence in the pub was replaced with a wave of screams, just like in the street outside.

The entire population of the Three Broomsticks started to scramble for the door and Harry, white faced, was out with the rest of them. They started to run and Apparate away. Students of the school were running back to the castle, crying and calling for help.

Only Harry stood frozen in the middle of the street, trying to understand what was happening. It couldn't be his fault. "It just couldn't be..." he whispered to himself.

"Harry!"

He spun around to the sound of his name. Hermione was running towards him, a frantic look on her face. Ron was just behind her. Then Harry realized that he didn't have his cloak on anymore. He looked around, but he couldn't see it anywhere. He knew that it must have fallen off when people had started pushing around him on their way out of the pub. There was no time to go back and look for it now.

"Harry!" Hermione called again, trying to catch his attention. Harry's mind was too dazed by the overwhelming occurrence at the moment. His eyes couldn't focus much on Hermione. It was his fault. His fault! Everyone was in danger because of him. How stupid and reckless could he have been? He felt himself shaking, his whole body convulsing into tremors. "Harry, we need to go! Do you hear me?" Hermione yelled, holding him by the forearms and giving him a little shake to make it snap back to reality. "Where is Ginny, Harry?"

At the sound of her name, Harry's snapped to attention at once. His eyes focused on Hermione's brown ones, searching, but he wasn't sure what exactly.

"Ginny...?" he asked weakly.

Hermione nodded frantically. Ron stepped over and pushed her away from him. He stood face to face with Harry, glaring menacingly. "Where did you leave my sister, Potter?"

"Ron! Now's not the time!" Hermione screamed just when a jet of light hit the wall of the pub behind them. "We've got to go! They're getting closer! Ginny must be already on her way back to the castle!"

With all his will, Harry forced himself to clear the fog that had clouded his brain. "Ginny!" he let out a scream, looking around and running back to the direction of the group of trees where he last saw her.

"Harry, no! Come back!" he heard Hermione scream at him, but he didn't stop to look back at her. Curses and spells flew all around him, but he didn't see who shot them. He dodged them easily, his wand already in his hand, ready to fight back.

But he didn't care. All he cared about was finding Ginny and make sure she was safe. He told her to wait for him, so he needed to see if she listened to him. What if she was still there? He couldn't leave her behind. His own life meant so little to him right now.

"GINNY!" he screamed again with all the air he held in his lungs, but he couldn't see her anywhere. He couldn't even see her where he left her. "Ginny!"

"Harry, over there!" he heard Hermione's voice. He turned around swiftly and saw her and Ron running over to him. Hermione was pointing to the ground, several feet between them, to the pebbled street. Her hair was always the first thing he looked for and there it was, vivid red as ever, spread over the whiteness of the snow on the ground. Realizing she was lying motionless, Harry sprang into a sprint, calling her name over and over and hoping that he was not too late and she would raise her head at the sound of his voice.

He was at her side a few seconds later and rolled her to her back. "Ginny," he sighed in relief, seeing her breathing and her eyes fluttering. She opened them and looked up at him and immediately they started to water with tears. The sight of that crushed his heart and he sniffed through his nose, forcing himself not to cry. He couldn't let her see him cry, he needed to look strong. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

"Ginny!" Ron's called as he knelt beside her as well. Hermione stood a few feet back, watching out for any Death Eaters anxiously. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head a little. "No... I don't think so..." she said feebly. "I saw the Death Eaters and started to run, but I stumbled and fell."

"Can you get up?" Harry asked, hoping to get them out of here as soon as possible. He could still hear people screaming as they ran

away. From the corner of his eye, he noticed several black figures walking in the streets, shooting spells, and another group of people, fighting them back.

She nodded, pushing herself on her elbows and then shifted her weight to her feet when she tried to stand up. Harry and Ron gave her a little room, watching her with cautious eyes. She stood still for a second, but then swayed and her eyes rolled back into her head. Harry caught her quickly in his arms before she hit the ground. Her eyes fluttered open again and she let out a low, protesting moan.

"She's too weak to walk. I'll have to carry her back," Harry told Ron. Ron nodded and grabbed Hermione's arm. Harry swept Ginny into his arms and they all started to run to the castle. He fell behind them. As little and light as Ginny was to him, holding her body was slowing him down, but he knew he had to keep running, for her sake, at least, if not his own.

"Harry, look out!" Hermione suddenly screamed and without even thinking, he ducked down, shielding Ginny's body with his own. He saw the curse coming their way and knew it would hit him in the back. A second, two seconds, three, had passed and he saw he was still safe. Alarmed that somehow it hit Ginny, he looked at her face, but even though his eyes were closed, she was still breathing. He looked up then and noticed a glowing shield charm covering them. He turned to see who cast the charm and saw that someone was standing behind them, his arms were spread out to his sides and his wand was in his hands. Harry thought he was looking at some bright light, but quickly realized what that whiteness was and he was completely speechless.

"What are you doing?" Draco screamed, looking down at Harry. "I can't hold the shield much longer! Go! Get her back to the castle!"

But Harry shook his head, knowing exactly at that moment what he should do. He sprang to his feet and ran over to Ron and Hermione, where they waited for him. He carefully placed Ginny in her brother's arms and looked at their bewildered expressions.

"Take her back," he told Ron with evident confidence in his voice.

"What about you?" he asked.

Harry looked at Ginny's peaceful face. "They're here for me," he mumbled quietly. He raised his head and looked back at Draco, noticing him shooting spell after spell at the approaching Death Eaters.

"Are you mad? This isn't the Dueling Club at school! This is for real! We've got to get out of here! Now!"

Harry shook his head in return. "I know what I'm doing."

"Get her back, Harry!" Draco screamed from behind. "I'll fight them off!"

"Go," Harry said to Ron with definitive tone in his voice. Ginny's eyes opened again and they locked on him.

"Harry, don't..." she whispered.

"I'm sorry, Gin," he said.

He exchanged one last glance with Ron, before he and Hermione started to run again. Harry turned around to face Draco, but shut his eyes when he heard Ginny's protesting shouts.

"No! Don't! Take me back to him, Ron! HARRY!"

Wiping off a single tear, Harry stepped next to Draco and started shooting spells at the Death Eaters.

"Thank you, Draco," Harry said solemnly while escaping a stunner.

"Thank me later if we make it back," Draco said through gritted teeth, casting another shield around them. They could see the small group of Aurors coming their way to help. "That was quite noble of you, what you did back there."

"Yeah... Guess that's not very Slytherin of me to do."

"Don't be stupid," Draco scolded. "Come on! Let's go, they've got it!" he said, seeing the Aurors now taking action and covering for them. He grabbed Harry's arm and they started to run.

They came to a halt when they heard several pops and Dumbledore's and the Order's forces had appeared out of thin air. Harry's eyes widened with shock when he noticed his parents, Remus and Sirius were running towards them.

"Harry?" his mother called, alarmed.

"Hi, Mum," he said in a small voice.

"Get down!" Draco yelled and pushed Harry to the ground and rolled himself to the opposite direction, splitting them apart. Another red light nearly hit them. Lily Potter recovered quickly from her shock and shot a stunner back at the Death Eaters who aimed at them. She hit it squarely in the chest and he dropped down unconscious to the floor.

"Nice hit, Mum!" Harry said with admiration.

"James! Your son is here!"

"Get back to the castle right this second, young man!" Harry heard his father's angry voice.

"No! You're all here! I'm staying!" he insisted. He got back to his feet, and looked back, searching for Draco. He saw him shooting several more spells at a Death Eater and managing to knock him out cold. He turned to look at the fighting scene, but stumbled back and fell on his behind, when a Death Eater was standing right in front of him, his wand pointed straight at him.

The Death Eater took off his mask, revealing his face. Harry didn't recognize him. He was short and fat, had dark hair and a long nose and he was leering at Harry and cackling a laugh.

"Expelliarmus," he called and Harry's wand shot from beneath his hand and into his.

Harry gulped, not daring to call for some help or look away even for a fraction of a second.

The Death Eater pointed his wand exactly at Harry's heart. He gave one last sneer before he called out, "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry shot his eyes firmly and heard his mother deafening scream. "HARRY!!!"

"NOOO!"

Harry felt like he was hit by a large stone. His body was thrown a few feet back and collided with a wall.

He opened his eyes, sure he would see heaven, but he was still in Hogsmeade, watching Death Eaters and Aurors and his parents running to him.

He wondered how was it possible that he was still alive after being hit by the Killing Curse.

He tried to breathe, and found it a little hard. A great weight was lying on his chest, pressing on his lungs.

Harry, still a little dazed, looked around. The squat Death Eater who shot the curse at him was now lying on the ground, tied by invisible ropes. Sirius was pointing three wands at him. Not too far from there, Remus was standing over two more stunned Death Eaters. Everything was quite all of the sudden.

His mother was holding his face in her hands, stroking it tenderly while tears flooded her eyes in heavy streams. His father crouched down to him and picked up something large into his arms and carried it away. Suddenly, Harry felt the heavy feeling being lifted away from him.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," his mother was saying to him.

Confused, he looked at his father, noticing the grim look on his face. At his feet lay a body. He could only see the legs. The face was covered with his father's cloak. But he didn't need to see the face to know who lay there.

He let out a sob, feeling his eyes sting with tears that he finally allowed to flow. "No..." he cried in agony.

His best friend saved his life and gave his own in return. His best friend, which he never really made amends with, was now dead. He could never ask him for forgiveness again.

"NO!" he screamed. He fell into his mother's embrace and cried while she rocked him. "It's can't be..."

"I'm so sorry, Harry. I'm so sorry," she whispered, her own voice choked-up.

A few minutes had passed and the pain refused to go away. Harry knew it would take much more than that until it disappeared, if it ever would. He was walking to the school's infirmary, his parents by his side, guiding the way, because he couldn't see much. All he kept seeing was the still body of his best friend.

His father pushed open the door to the hospital wing. The room was full with scared students. Harry didn't see, he could only hear their voices.

"Harry!" he heard Ginny's voice and he was suddenly engulfed into a warm hug. The smell of flowers entered his nose, but as much as he wanted to respond to her, he couldn't feel anything. "You Prat! I was worried sick! Thank goodness you're okay! Don't you ever do that to me again, you understand? You could have died out there!"

When he didn't say or do anything in return, she pulled back and looked with a puzzled expression at his parents. Receiving a painful look in return from both, she took his face in her hands and made him look her in the eyes. "What's wrong?"

He couldn't hold it in anymore. The sob burst out and he couldn't stop it. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck, crying his heart out.

Completely taken aback, Ginny held him close and ran her hand up and down his back soothingly.

"Draco..." he whispered in pain and let out another sob.

The room fell into deadly silence and only Hermione, who was sitting in the back, let out a gasp of horror. "Oh, my God."

A/N: Like I said, fluff mixed with angst. I hope I didn't depress you too much and that you liked it. And in case you wondered, then no, I didn't plan for Draco to die when I started this story, but that's where it was heading lately and I'm quite happy with the result. I'm sorry if you liked him and now hate me for killing him, but hey, that's how my fic goes and if you don't like Draco dying, you can always go back and read Deathly Hallows and read the epilogue...

Now, this is nearly the end! I think there will be another chapter and an epilogue to this story. Keep checking my profile for updates and vote the poll in there if you haven't yet had the chance to. Thank you for reading and please review and tell me what you think.

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